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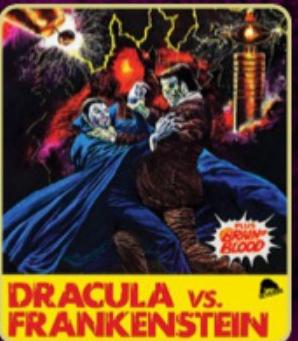
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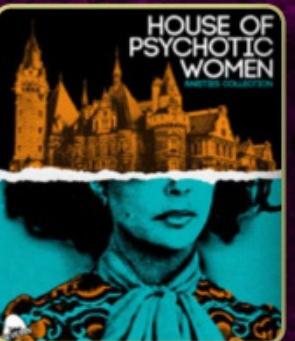
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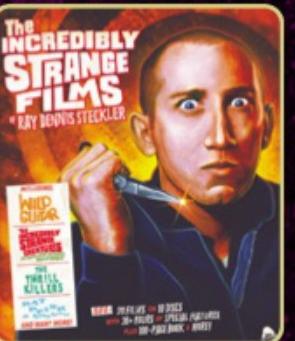
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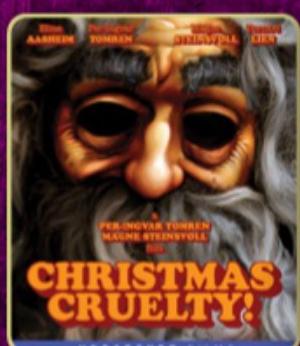
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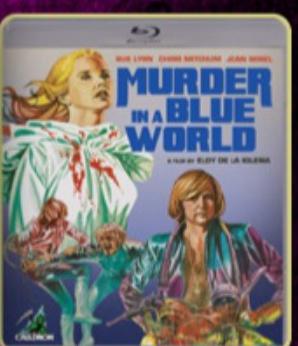
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12 HERALD FROM HELL

From the ashes of years in isolation comes a new boogeyman to haunt your dreams in *The Harbinger*.

PLUS! Rue Morgue traces the path of horror's freshest raconteur, writer/director Andy Mitton; and Robert (*The Witch*) Eggers recalls working on Mitton's debut movie *Yellowbrickroad*.

by MICHAEL GINGOLD

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Chet Zar's mammoth new art book, *Dy5topia*, is a bestiary collecting twenty years of sinister creations... the making of which nearly unmade the artist.

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NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

I know we're sick of talking about COVID-19; I totally get it. After our special plague issue back in 2020 [RM#195], I've made every effort to give the subject its due and then move forward by focusing on the pinprick of light at the end of that tunnel. But let's not fool ourselves by thinking it's over, or that the "new normal" is a comfortable notion just yet. The cultural tidal wave caused by the pandemic continues to trouble the waters of everyday life, and not just for those suffering the long-term effects of the virus. I had COVID at the end of July and, thanks to vaccination and copious amounts of rest, my symptoms were relatively mild and I recovered quickly... physically, anyway. What took longer to recoup was the emotional toll – the feelings of shame, guilt, and remorse for having brought this disease into my home and putting my loved ones at risk. The fever sweats sucked, but the internal turmoil was arguably worse, and I had yet to see this particular facet of our current shared experience explored to its fullest until I saw Andy Mitton's *The Harbinger*.

In addition to its incredible script, memorable characters, and pitch-perfect performances from its gifted leads, *The Harbinger* bowled me over in both its literal narrative and its metaphorical heft. The emotional aspects of the past several years are explored in ways both heartbreakingly validating and validating in the film, particularly in its portrayal of characters suffering from pre-existing mental illness. For these characters, as well as myself personally, the hardest thing about survival is in mustering the sheer will to march on toward an ever-unpredictable future. Indeed, we've grappled with much more than the pandemic over the past few years, from political upheaval to literal war. *The Harbinger*'s shadowy boogeyman that threatens to drag us from our nightmares to nonexistence presents a terrifyingly prescient verisimilitude to our increasingly unstable existence.

Thankfully, change needn't always be a frightening prospect, dear reader. As I write this, *Rue Morgue* is tentacle-deep into our latest stage of metamorphosis. Our beautifully illustrated pages are a major point of pride for us, and this periodical has boasted some incredible talent in our art department. Andrew Wright joined the *Rue Morgue* family in 2012, and it's with equal parts pride and sadness that I report he's leaving us to pursue a career in tattooing. If you're ever in Toronto and want your meat sack to look as great as the past ten years of this magazine, look him up! Stepping into his admittedly big shoes is Shane Mills, whose name you might recognize from our coverage of his Newfoundland indie horror collective Grind Mind [RM#203].

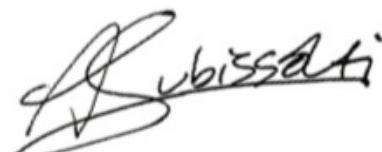
Many of our subscribers have had some interaction with our Operations Manager Mariam Bastani, be it to change your address, renew your subscription, or give us shit for a negative review. Mariam is also leaving *Rue Morgue*; she'll be lending her talents to Fathom Productions, and I've no doubt they will benefit from her professionalism and attentiveness as much as we have. Joining our team in her stead is Richelle Charkot, who has been part of the *Rue Morgue* family since interning here eight years ago. Please join me in welcoming Shane and Richelle to our masthead!

Departing from our pages is another former intern, Evan Millar, who has helmed our video game coverage in Play Dead for several years. As he shifts his attention to his growing family (Player 4 has just arrived!), Monica S. Kuebler will be taking over his position.

And just as *Rue Morgue* is opening doors to new personnel, we're also moving shop! The Rue Morgue Manor on Dufferin Street has been our home for a decade, and we have many fond memories of haunting this space and neighbourhood. However, our needs have changed over the years, and we're laying down roots in a charming (and appropriately spooky) new home in a quiet residential neighbourhood just west of Toronto's core. For myself, as Mistress of the Manor, I feel much like Elvira in *Mistress of the Dark* – the creepy goth lady with her impossibly cute dog, tending her black flower garden while the local busybodies whisper about what must go down in her cobwebby lair. Ever the black sheep, I'm eager to occupy the spookiest house on the block... but if the neighbourhood children start disappearing, I'm toast!

Back to *The Harbinger*, the sociologist in me rests assured that humanity's track record of keeping on keepin' on through the direst of times will see humanity persevere – for a while, anyway – even as the headlines reveal new circles of hell for us to traverse. And there's even a glimmer of my old activist optimism that wants to believe that the crumbling of social institutions that no longer serve us may lead to some much-needed reappraisal and rebuilding, just as *Rue Morgue* itself is undergoing right now.

Change is scary, but scary can be good. And horror is here so we can face it together.



ANDREA SUBISSATI
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Horror in Culture & Entertainment

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RUE MORGUE #209 would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of Conrad Williams, Ted Geoghegan, Francis Lalonde, and Al McMullan.

Cover: *The Harbinger*
Image prompts and post-production: Ann Crow
Design by Shane Mills

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POST MORTEM

COMMENTS ♀ QUESTIONS ♀ CRITICISM



HAPPY ANNIVERSARY Rue Morgue! I am honoured to be a member of the horror community, and a loyal reader! I am beyond excited to get into this issue. Here's to many more years of Horror in Culture and Entertainment!

DAVID JOSHUA, VIA FACEBOOK

IN THE SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER ISSUE, I was tickled pink to see Ghost's "Year Zero" included in the list of "25 Ghastliest Music Videos" article. As well, you had reviews of some of their albums in previous issues. I now beg, plead, implore, coerce, cajole, and maybe even demand (no, just kidding on that) that you do a feature on front-man Tobias Forge and his demonic alter egos, as he and the band definitely have a ginormous horror element in their images and music. I have devoted *mucho dinero* into all of the masks, costumes, figures, and music and I like to play a trick on people who are unfamiliar with the band: I have them close their eyes, or turn away from the screen – at which point I will play a Ghost song such as "He Is" or "Life Eternal." When that person compliments what they are hearing, I then ask them to look at the screen – resulting in the usual "what the f%#K" horrified response. So please, please, please do an article/feature on this band – a band that only the Dark Lord could summon. *Rue Morgue* and Ghost would be a marriage truly made in... well... Hell.

PAUL POWER (A NAMELESS GHOUL) – NOVA SCOTIA

PICKED [RM#208] UP on Sunday. Needless to say, the Halloween issues of @RueMorgueMag are usually some of the most spectacular. 23 years ago, in 1999, I got my first issue of RM.

@KDAVJEFF, VIA INSTAGRAM

I'VE ONLY JUST STARTED delving into the Halloween issue of @RueMorgue [RM#208] and can see that it's another truly exceptional effort. Congratulations to @necromandrea and my talented colleagues at the world's greatest horror mag. Going from strength to strength!

@DOYLEOFDARKNESS, VIA TWITTER

I WANT TO THANK Rue Morgue for publishing a magazine that has helped me get through a very tough time in life. In RM#206, Andrea Subissati's "Note from Underground" references a film in the works called *Mental Health and Horror: A Documentary*. This shows me that I am not the

only one thinking about horror films in this light and I really look forward to being able to eventually watch this film. Though horror films can help process your nightmares and fears, they can also plant the seed of fear and create nightmares. This is not problematic; they can help one see red flags. With that said, these many questions have led me to write a senior thesis on how horror films create an unlikely space in which women emerge as active agents who push back on male dominance and patriarchy in surprising ways. I make the argument that the women's movement helped to fuel the evolution of both the final girl and slasher films in general. In addition, I claim that we now live in an era of post-MeToo horror and, now more than ever, these films help to empower women and help society cope with the world we live in. Thank you, *Rue Morgue*, for keeping me well informed about horror films and contributing extensively to this project.

ANDREW R. KOVALSKY – NAPANOCH, NEW YORK

I AM CURRENTLY INCARCERATED in a maximum security prison in the state of Texas and your awesome horror magazine is one of the few bright points in my life. As if being in prison as a first-time offender is not scary enough, due to problems in our mailroom I did not receive the May/June issue of *Rue Morgue* – thereby denied the thing that brings some semblance of sanity – which was a veritable nightmare. Thanks to your phenomenal customer service, I was able to have the same issue re-shipped, no questions asked, and I just received it last night. All is right in my little world once more. Thank you for everything that you do!

HARLIN PIERCE, ADDRESS WITHHELD

I STUMBLED UPON your magazine while being incarcerated. One of my fellow inmates caught chain (went to prison) and left issues RM#200 through RM#206 and I ended up with all of them (it only cost me a honey bun). Well, I'm glad I did.

I love horror movies and books. This magazine is fucking badass. I can't seem to put it down. I've read it from cover to cover and love the articles. I plan on becoming a subscriber as soon as I get out.

DIABLO, ADDRESS WITHHELD

MAIL DAY! @RueMorgueMag, best horror mag out there.

@SCOTTHALLBEAST, VIA INSTAGRAM



@RUEMORGUE: Your "Rated M for Macabre" article [RM#208] has me wanting an Xbox more than ever before. What a great tease!

@FREERANGEZOMBIE, VIA TWITTER

RE: "HORROR ON THE ROCKS" on Rue Morgue TV – My favourite pairing is Mike and Rue Morgue! Great video and cannot wait to see more!

FRIGHT RAGS, VIA YOUTUBE

ERRATA In RM#208, we incorrectly identified where *Terrifier 2* would be available. The film is streaming exclusively on Screambox. Also, photos for *Terrifier 2* courtesy of Jeff Harris – jeff-harrisphoto.com. Rue Morgue regrets the errors.

WE ENCOURAGE READERS TO SEND THEIR COMMENTS VIA MAIL OR EMAIL. LETTERS MAY BE EDITED FOR LENGTH AND/OR CONTENT.
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CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE #
209

Jamie Lee Curtis' salary for 1978's *Halloween* was \$8000; her salary for *Halloween Ends* was \$3.5 million dollars.

A whopping 27 minutes of footage from *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984) was reused in the 1987 sequel.

Austrian-American mathematician Kurt Gödel developed a fear of being poisoned and refused to eat food prepared by anyone but his wife. He died of starvation in 1978 after she became ill.

Freddy Krueger's iconic red-and-green sweater appears in both *Scream* (1996) and *Scream 2* (1997), being worn by Fred the janitor (played by director Wes Craven himself) and then hanging up in Sidney's dorm room.

Scotophobia is a fear of being stared at.

Baseballer Eddie Waitkus, the inspiration for Robert Redford's character in 1984's *The Natural*, was almost killed in 1949 after being shot by an obsessed female fan. It is one of the first known instances of celebrity stalking.

Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1992) was released to coincide with the 80th anniversary of Stoker's death and 95th of the novel's publishing.

Your body produces extra saliva prior to vomiting to protect your teeth from the upcoming stomach acids.

For the shots of a deserted London in *28 Days Later* (2002), production convinced police to stop traffic early on a Sunday morning in order to capture the footage.

Buying a lottery ticket in 16th-century England came with an added promise to be granted immunity for one arrest, excluding capital crimes like murder or treason.

Director Jack Hill wrote a treatment for a sequel to his 1967 film *Spider Baby* called *Vampire Orgy*, but it was never produced.

The bus stop scene in Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942) contains cinema's first jump scare, a technique that was subsequently referred to as a "Lewton Bus" after the film's producer.

The American Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates there are an average of 15,000 decoration-related emergency room visits every holiday season

COMPILED BY JAY CLARKE
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EXPIRING MINDS

ON RUE MORGUE'S SOCIAL MEDIA

M. Night Shyamalan is directing 2023. What's the plot twist?

We find out Jordan Peele has actually been letting M. Night direct movies under his name.

TIM AVERS, VIA FACEBOOK

He should do one where there isn't one. That would be a twist... for him.

KEITH KETTMANN, VIA FACEBOOK

The world ended in 2012.

ANSELMO LUIZ BONALDI BETIOL, VIA FACEBOOK

That it might be okay to watch!

ERIC BENTON, VIA FACEBOOK

The plot twist is that the movie was watching you the whole time.

@TECHNICOLORFILM, VIA TWITTER

We are all in a coma and it's actually 1988.

@SHAWNHOPEKINSART, VIA TWITTER

Twisty the Clown shows up and it becomes a very bizarre musical.

@MACABREYOGI, VIA INSTAGRAM

FINAL WORDS

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THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE MARCUS TWINS

On one hand, David Cronenberg's 1988 film *Dead Ringers* isn't a typical "Cronenbergian" entry in that it foregoes a lot of the body horror that most people associate with his work. On the other hand, Cronenberg has always explored deterioration of the mind just as much as the body, and that mental degradation is on full display as Jeremy Irons plays twin brothers Elliot and Beverly Mantle, balancing creepiness and sadness in their eerie, codependent relationship. But perhaps most disturbing is how close the Mantle brothers are to their real-life counterparts, Cyril and Stewart Marcus.

Just like the Mantles, twin brothers Cyril and Stewart were prominent gynecologists in New York City. Although they were not identical, they were very similar from the time they were children – think Frasier and Niles Crane amped up to eleven, as they were unathletic snobs, always dressed in shirts and ties, who often only talked to one another. When they did speak with others, they were described as automatons mimicking what they thought human interaction should look like.

Essayist Linda Wolfe, who would later write

an account of the twins after their death, was one of Stewart's patients and recalls him lashing out and screaming during appointments. Other patients recall increasingly bizarre behaviour – in the film, Beverly shares a creepy anecdote about women having sex with dogs, which was pulled from a similar story that Stewart told one of his patients.

Contributing to the Marcus twins' errant behaviour was a drug habit that, just like their cinematic counterparts, severely affected their ability to do their jobs. Stewart suffered an overdose in 1972, and in 1975, the twins attempted to detox on their own, isolating themselves in their apartment. On July 19, their handyman entered their home after getting reports of foul odours emanating from the unit. There, he found both brothers dead, with human feces on one of the chairs and twenty dollars in cash strewn about the floor.

A battery of medical tests couldn't detect narcotics in their systems, so it's assumed that they died from withdrawal symptoms. Forensics determined that Stewart had died two days before Cyril, and Cyril was spotted leaving the building briefly after Stewart would have already expired. He must have returned to the home with his brother's corpse



and simply waited to die himself.

Creatives explored the lurid tale of the ill-fated Marcus twins for years after their death, from Wolfe's essay to various stories, books, podcasts and, of course, Cronenberg's film. It's a tad reductive to boil the true story down to "twins are creepy" but the use of the doppelgänger trope in horror narratives does make us question our own sense of self, and to see calamity hit these brothers so similarly is a twin tragedy.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

Laurel Near, The Lady in the Radiator from *Eraserhead* (1977)

Born in California in 1953, Laurel Near started performing at an early age. She was singing in a trio with her two sisters Holly and Timi when she met director David Lynch through a mutual friend, long-time collaborator Catherine E. Coulson. The idea of the Lady in the Radiator came to Lynch when he was already years into filming his debut feature *Eraserhead*, and he thought Near was the perfect subject to bring her to life. The sequence was shot over several days in the spring of 1974 and Near described her distinctive

makeup as "warm, thick stuff that when it came off it sort of peeled your face off with it." After *Eraserhead*, she spent some time in Oregon performing with a dance troupe before returning to California. She is now a mother of three and co-director of the School of Performing Arts and Cultural Education in Ukiah.

JAY CLARKE



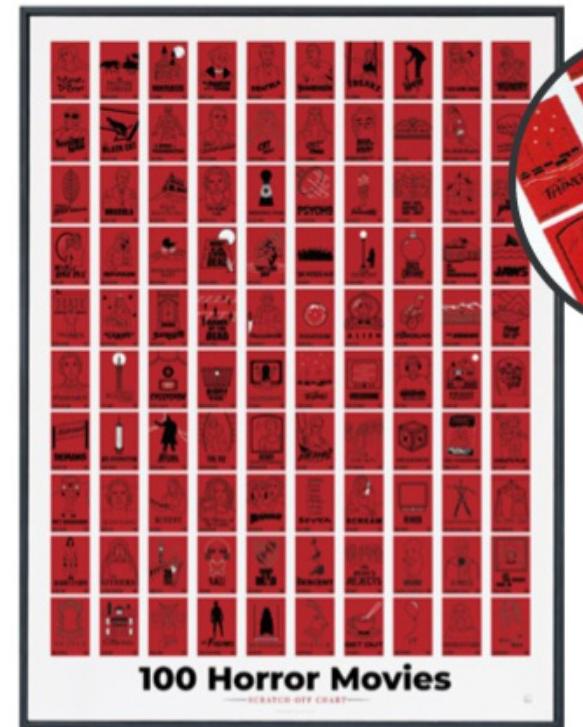
NEEDFUL THINGS

1 100 HORROR MOVIES SCRATCH-OFF CHART

\$25 USD

Track your horror flicks with this chart featuring panels of 100 essential horror movies that scratch off to reveal a ghastly full-colour image beneath. Showcasing such classics as *The Shining* as well as more recent fare like 2020's *The Invisible Man*, this chart is a cool visual checklist for the genre film completist and a guaranteed conversation piece.

[Popchart.co](https://www.popchart.co)



2 GREMLINS COUNT DOWN CALENDAR

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Now you can observe the festive season in Mogwai style with this count down calendar, featuring 31 days of 1-inch collectibles to display on the included cardboard pop-up movie theatre scene. Not into Christmas? Not a prob – use it to observe any month of the year that warrants a *Gremlins* infestation!

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3 FREDDY KRUEGER CHOPSTICKS

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Vampires hate garlic, but that's no reason to keep from putting Gracula's sharp fangs to work mincing cloves for you. This sturdy 7.5-inch plastic press is an eye-catching time-saver in the kitchen and can also be used for ginger, nuts, chili peppers, and whatever else you're putting in your cauldron.

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5 DARK HUMOR MISFORTUNE COOKIES

\$20 USD

We hate to be the bearer of bad news – so we'll let these tasty treats do the talking! Sold in packs of eight and (unlucky) thirteen, these misfortune cookies are individually wrapped and contain the kind of melancholy messages and fearful forecasts you'd expect from pitch-back confections. Poe approved!

[Uncommongoods.com](https://www.uncommongoods.com)





Cryptic Collectibles

MOLDYCREATIONS' DAYTRIPPER BONG

We can all name a few horror movies that play better with (ahem) herbal accompaniment. Thanks to Moldycreations, you can now puff-puff-pass in style! These one-of-a-kind water pipes (bongs to the initiated) are embellished with hand-sculpted monster features including ultra-realistic flesh, toothy grins, and appropriately glazed eyeballs for the midnight tokers. Munchies not included.

INSPIRATION

"I mostly grew up drawing and didn't get into sculpting until I was around 30 years old. One series of pictures I drew was called 'drugs doing drugs' and I would do a mash-up of a pot leaf drinking alcohol or a beer bottle taking shrooms – this was a play on that series but now it's a bong doing drugs!"

MATERIALS

Polymer clay, casting resin, epoxy resin, and acrylic paint

PRICE

\$20 – \$1,000 USD

FIND IT

moldycreations.com

CHRIS HAMMOND



Vintage and Classic

CREEPSHOW GRAPHIC NOVELLA

(Plume-New American Library Inc., 1982)

An affectionate, darkly comedic homage to the lurid horror-themed EC Comics of the 1950s, 1982's *Creepshow* was among the first collaborations between Stephen King and George A. Romero. In lieu of the standard tie-in novelization that accompanied many horror films of the era, *Creepshow* received a graphic novel adaptation instead. Published by New American Library imprint Plume, the 64-page oversized softcover book featured a beautifully illustrated cover by EC illustrator Jack Kamen and striking interior art by famed comic book artist and *Swamp Thing* co-creator Bernie Wrightson and his wife,

Michele. The book closely follows King's screenplay and features the same five tales in the anthology, omitting the film's wraparound segments. Wrightson's art gives the comic an added gruesomeness, and a few parts end up being more shocking than the movie version. The book was reprinted in 2017 by Simon & Schuster imprint Gallery 13 Comics. Original first edition copies in mint condition can sell for upwards of \$100 on eBay.

JAMES BURRELL

MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT RUE-MORGUE.COM



THE HARBINGER

from

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

FROM THE ASHES OF YEARS IN
ISOLATION COMES A NEW BOOGEYMAN
TO HAUNT YOUR DREAMS IN
ANDY MITTON'S *THE HARBINGER*



THERE'S A NEW, FRIGHTENING FIGURE HAUNTING DREAMS ON SCREEN – and it has a more insidious MO than plunging its victims into visual puns and special-effects nightmare sequences. This new nocturnal demon not only threatens the sanity of its victims but seeks to wipe them completely off the face of Earth, including from the memories of their loved ones. Bearing the visage of a medieval plague doctor, it's the eponymous creature haunting writer/director Andy Mitton's *The Harbinger*, coming to theatres and VOD on December 1 from XYZ Films in the U.S. and Elevation Pictures in Canada.

Bearing no relation to Will Clipstone's film of the same name from earlier this fall, *The Harbinger* is Mitton's fourth feature, following *The Witch in the Window* (2018) and a pair of films co-directed with Jesse Holland: 2016's *We Go On* and 2010's *Yellowbrickroad* (see sidebar, p.16). The latter employed a pre-*The Witch* Robert Eggers as costume designer and, with his latest work, Mitton demonstrates that he deserves discussion in the same breath as that filmmaker. Yet where Eggers travels back in time to tell his tales of human dissolution, *The Harbinger* is very much of the here and now. Or more specifically, a couple of years ago.

Evocatively and empathetically conflating his supernatural terror with the fears engendered by the pandemic, Mitton sets his film during the first winter of sheltering in place. Monique (Gabby Beans) is sharing an upstate-New York house with her brother Lyle (Myles Walker) and their fa-

ther Ronald (Raymond Anthony Thomas) – both of whom object when she announces her plans to travel to Queens to help out her old friend Mavis (Emily Davis). Mavis is suffering far more than COVID-era anxiety: she's plagued by awful nightmares involving a large hooded figure that have led her into a deep pit of despair, as well as acts of self-harm. When Monique arrives and tries to assist her, the monster invades her dreamsphere as well, and she soon learns the true, horrible goal of this dreadful being.

All of Mitton's previous movies have told supernatural stories in deeply personal terms, and he has perfected that synthesis with *The Harbinger*. Even those potential viewers who might feel they don't want to watch another COVID-era story will find that Mitton has treated this dire period of human history with a sensitivity and keen sense of observation that legitimize its dramatic use here. Better still, he weaves the details of his new demon into the specifics and anxieties of that time; the Harbinger is plenty frightening on its own, and even more so in the way its endgame takes the tragedy of the pandemic a step further. Similarly, Mitton's genuinely scary nightmare set pieces play off the circumstances of Monique's and Mavis' existences, further upsetting their and our sense of security.

The Harbinger

also showcases Mitton's skill with actors: Beans, Walker, and Thomas create a fully lived-in family dynamic that could be shattered by the simple act of venturing outside their bubble, while the equally accomplished Davis has us fearing for her from her very first scene. There are also brief amusing turns by Stephanie Roth Haberle as Mavis' anti-masking neighbour and Laura Heisler as the inevitable demonologist who must be consulted online – and, like every other academic at the time, does so while stuck at home with her kids. A very human story that's also a horrifying one, *The Harbinger* portends greater recognition for and more great things from its creator, who spoke with *Rue Morgue* following the movie's world premiere at Montreal's Fantasia International Film Festival.



"WE USED JACOB'S LADDER AS A SORT OF TONAL TOUCHSTONE EARLY ON, AND FOLLOWED IT FROM THERE."

- WRITER/DIRECTOR ANDY MITTON

Did you begin with the idea to make a pandemic-era horror film, or was the concept of The Harbinger something you'd come up with before COVID?

It was a naturally occurring, desperate inspiration during COVID. In the summer of 2020, we were hoping to get another film off the ground, and then kind of like everyone else, when May rolled around and the reality set in of what we were really looking at, those plans went out the window. And I started thinking about things we could achieve during this time, because we didn't know when there would be a vaccine, or what would happen, and we were all sort of feeling a collective dread. And this was a really natural response to it; it's sort of like in songwriting, sometimes there's the song that comes out very quickly, and then there are the ones that you work on over time. This was one where the muse just came down one night and hit me over the head as I was pacing the basement and, in a way, that let me draw on my own dread, and draw on the opportunity of collective global dread; it's an opportunity, because you're always looking to relate to people, and how often is there something that everyone in the world relates to? So as much as I knew it would be tricky for some people, it was also irresistible from that standpoint. I was also having terrible nightmares at the time, so I was really interested in exploring that. After having done a few ghost movies, I was interested in going back into the demonic sphere and taking what I've learned and going into that place, because it's a favourite of mine. We used *Jacob's Ladder* as a sort of tonal touchstone early on, and followed it from there. It was a very quick, inspired process. I was writing in July, we had a draft in August and we were shooting in February.

There have obviously been a lot of horror movies dealing with nightmares, and bad dreams leaking into reality, so how did you go about making this one distinctive?

I knew that tonally, it was going to be at least very different from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, because we didn't have the camp factor. I knew that stylistically, I wanted a down-and-dirty, hand-held, naturalistic movie. Although I have a horror bad guy, I guess, with a mask, that's the centre or the source of the fear, he's also the designer of the dreams, and so the source of



the fear can come from other faces; from Cody [Braverman], our child actor, from other people who appear in her nightmares. So I thought that was a fun playground, and once I knew that the tone was unique, I trust that what I do is going to be me, it's going to have my fingerprint, for better or for worse, because it came from a very personal place and it flew out of me. Past a certain point, I stopped worrying about what else it might relate to, and just started to focus on what

this machine was and making sure it felt right.

What was your approach to balancing the real-life horrors of COVID with the supernatural threat of the Harbinger?

I didn't think too hard about that balance. That sort of goes back to the theory of why I was willing to do a pandemic-related horror movie. I've gotten to know horror audiences well enough over these years [to know] that they're willing



Year Of Annihilation: Like the pandemic that inspired the monster, everyone is at risk of the Harbinger's dark influence, including young Edward (Cody Braverman).

to look deeper, to not be purely escapist, and to look the uncomfortable thing in the eye, if you're delivering the goods. If you are story-first, there's nothing they won't be interested in facing, and they're willing to get right on the nerve. So I tried to just walk that tightrope; I wanted to deal with these things very seriously. There's a lot of meat on the bones of the movie, but I kept checking in with my twelve-year-old self to make sure I was scared at the moments I wanted to be scared, that there would be jumps, that it would be a ride, that it would hopefully be fun and cathartic as well, and at the end of the day, pray that the balance turned out well. I haven't sat in an audience and watched it yet; tonight's the first time, so we'll see how it balances out.

The Harbinger is pretty uncompromising in the way it deals with its characters. Did you always know that the story was headed into those very dark places while you were writing it?

Yes. The night I thought of it, the gears of the machine were in place. I didn't know all the internals, but I knew what the machine was spitting out at the end, and I knew what it meant for me. The movie comes down to hope in the face of hopelessness, when there's no reason for it. I do think that comes through in the end, but it was also my primal scream, and I always knew it was going to be a little shattering, and wanted to just go for it. Especially after *The Witch in the Window*, which was kind of a lyrical, come-in-

the-back-door sort of movie, I was ready to do something that would grab people by the collar and test the limits a little bit more.

Did the actors who played the family get a chance to rehearse, or did they have to just jump into doing their scenes together?

We did Zoom rehearsals, which I was skeptical of at first, because Zoom was new to all of us at that point. But it wound up being really cool, because we were able to just focus on the thought side. And we had more time to get to know each other, because we were not trying to schedule everyone to get in the same room and deal with everyone's agents. We could just get on Zoom, it was attainable, so we could spend time and relax a little bit more. And there was instant chemistry; one of the coolest things about that first week on set was, we were all terrified – since we shot the family stuff first, we were in a pretty small house, and we were stressed and testing and flying without a safety net in terms of COVID. And everyone relaxed when they saw what was going on, when we called "Action," between the family, because they felt right together, and it just clicked. We got lucky, and there was a warmth on the set. In fact, when I think back to that period of time in general, it was so filled with dread, but thinking about that month in Binghamton, for all the stress that inevitably was there, it's a very warm place in my memory. I think about a lot of good hearts lifting up a massive weight together. It was really nice.

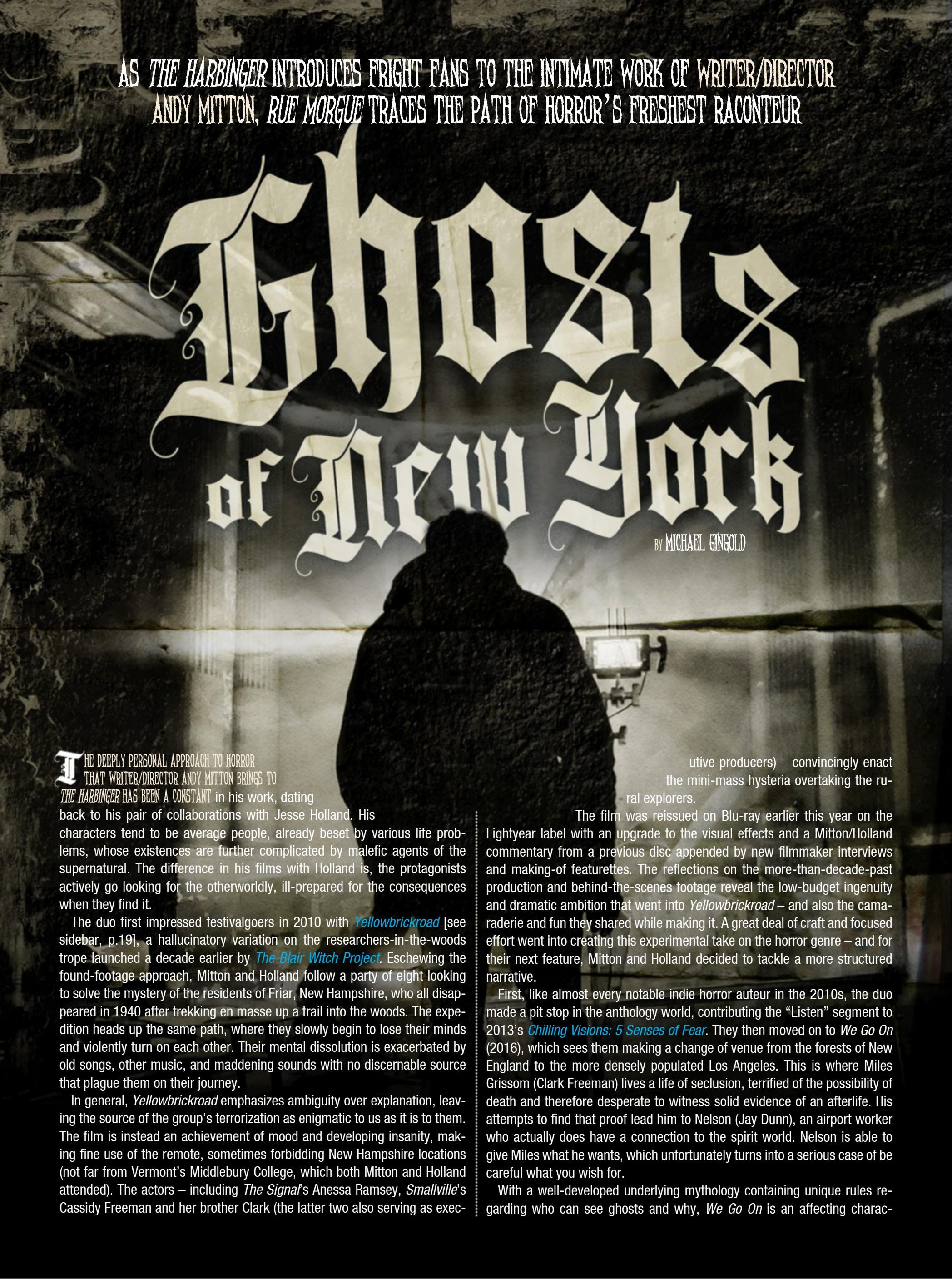
The Harbinger doesn't get political about the pandemic, aside from the briefly seen character of the neighbour. Can you talk about having her as the one representation of the political side of the situation?

I allowed myself exactly that much, because we were all feeling our feelings about it at that point. But even then, I tried to deal with that with some dimension and empathy for either side, but let that be the sole comment of that nature, because if the advantage here is that we're striking a feeling that we all relate to, no matter where on the spectrum we are, I didn't want to lose that advantage. That was important to me.

I liked some of the other period-specific details as well, like the video call with the demonologist who is being distracted by the kids who are at home with her.

Those are my kids! That's my wife and my kids there. My wife Laura Heisler [who plays the role] is a great actor, and I knew when I wrote it that I was living with a person who could slay this role, and I might as well throw the kids in, because it seemed like a great way to take the horror trope of the research scene, the scene where you get information, and turn that on its head, where even the demonologists are home, wrestling with their children and trying to juggle their lives. That's usually the sort of scene that stresses me out and I really worry about, and I knew after we shot it, I was into it.

AS THE HARBINGER INTRODUCES FRIGHT FANS TO THE INTIMATE WORK OF WRITER/DIRECTOR ANDY MITTON, RUE MORGUE TRACES THE PATH OF HORROR'S FRESHEST RACONTEUR



HARBINGER of New York

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

THE DEEPLY PERSONAL APPROACH TO HORROR THAT WRITER/DIRECTOR ANDY MITTON BRINGS TO *THE HARBINGER* HAS BEEN A CONSTANT in his work, dating

back to his pair of collaborations with Jesse Holland. His characters tend to be average people, already beset by various life problems, whose existences are further complicated by malefic agents of the supernatural. The difference in his films with Holland is, the protagonists actively go looking for the otherworldly, ill-prepared for the consequences when they find it.

The duo first impressed festivalgoers in 2010 with *Yellowbrickroad* [see sidebar, p.19], a hallucinatory variation on the researchers-in-the-woods trope launched a decade earlier by *The Blair Witch Project*. Eschewing the found-footage approach, Mitton and Holland follow a party of eight looking to solve the mystery of the residents of Friar, New Hampshire, who all disappeared in 1940 after trekking en masse up a trail into the woods. The expedition heads up the same path, where they slowly begin to lose their minds and violently turn on each other. Their mental dissolution is exacerbated by old songs, other music, and maddening sounds with no discernable source that plague them on their journey.

In general, *Yellowbrickroad* emphasizes ambiguity over explanation, leaving the source of the group's terrorization as enigmatic to us as it is to them. The film is instead an achievement of mood and developing insanity, making fine use of the remote, sometimes forbidding New Hampshire locations (not far from Vermont's Middlebury College, which both Mitton and Holland attended). The actors – including *The Signal's* Anessa Ramsey, *Smallville's* Cassidy Freeman and her brother Clark (the latter two also serving as exec-

utive producers) – convincingly enact the mini-mass hysteria overtaking the rural explorers.

The film was reissued on Blu-ray earlier this year on the Lightyear label with an upgrade to the visual effects and a Mitton/Holland commentary from a previous disc appended by new filmmaker interviews and making-of featurettes. The reflections on the more-than-decade-past production and behind-the-scenes footage reveal the low-budget ingenuity and dramatic ambition that went into *Yellowbrickroad* – and also the camaraderie and fun they shared while making it. A great deal of craft and focused effort went into creating this experimental take on the horror genre – and for their next feature, Mitton and Holland decided to tackle a more structured narrative.

First, like almost every notable indie horror auteur in the 2010s, the duo made a pit stop in the anthology world, contributing the "Listen" segment to 2013's *Chilling Visions: 5 Senses of Fear*. They then moved on to *We Go On* (2016), which sees them making a change of venue from the forests of New England to the more densely populated Los Angeles. This is where Miles Grissom (Clark Freeman) lives a life of seclusion, terrified of the possibility of death and therefore desperate to witness solid evidence of an afterlife. His attempts to find that proof lead him to Nelson (Jay Dunn), an airport worker who actually does have a connection to the spirit world. Nelson is able to give Miles what he wants, which unfortunately turns into a serious case of be careful what you wish for.

With a well-developed underlying mythology containing unique rules regarding who can see ghosts and why, *We Go On* is an affecting charac-

ter study of a self-traumatized man learning a lesson about messing with the great beyond. At the same time, it's a consistently surprising supernatural narrative in which Miles soon doesn't know which way to turn, and the audience doesn't know what's coming next. Some of the themes are reminiscent of Asian spookers such as *Ju-on/The Grudge*, but Mitton and Holland make the spectral subgenre their own and keep the scares and chilling visuals flowing. Some of the eeriest moments derive from the filmmakers' use of the Surfridge neighbourhood as a location; once a prosperous beach community, it was abandoned in the 1960s due to the expansion of the adjoining LAX. It's now a fenced-in ghost town where the houses are gone but the roads remain, and the streetlights still turn on at night.

Just as in *Yellowbrickroad*, the filmmakers make evocative use of sound in *We Go On*, with Mitton himself composing the score (as he did on his subsequent solo features, including *The Harbinger*). They also elicit strong performances from their cast, a mix of less familiar but accomplished actors (Freeman, Dunn, and Mitton's wife Laura Heisler as a woman with a surprising part in the scenario) and veterans, including Annette O'Toole (*Cat People*, 1990's *It*) as Miles' skeptical but supportive mother, and John Glover (*Gremlins 2: The New Batch*, *In the Mouth of Madness*) as a professor who attempts to help Miles out. Scoring a berth on Shudder following its festival run, *We Go On* seemed like its title was bound to reflect the future of its creators.

Subsequently, however, Mitton and Holland decided to part ways, as the former was compelled to move to New York while the latter remained in L.A., and they became interested in telling different kinds of stories. Holland quickly took on a SyFy original called *The Crooked Man* (2016), co-starring *Spawn*'s Michael Jai White, while Mitton tackled a project initially titled *The Vermont House* that returned him to the territory of his first screen outing, and once again starred a veteran of *Yellowbrickroad*, Alex Draper. Later rechristened *The Witch in the Window*, the movie is actually another ghost story, this one inspired by an actual event in Mitton's life. When he was young, he recalls, he had a conversation with a spirit in his bedroom; for years thereafter, his parents attempted to reassure him by falsely claiming he had been asleep and dreamed the encounter. Only when he was thirteen did his mother admit that he had been awake at the time, which got the grown-up Mitton (who now had children of his own) thinking about the ways in which parents try to protect their offspring.

That inspired the *Witch* scenario, in which Draper (who plays Simon) travels to Vermont to flip a house with his twelve-year-old son Finn (Charlie Tacker) in the wake of his divorce. That fixer-upper turns out to already be occupied by the revenant of a woman named Lydia (Carol Stanzione) who passed away many years before, seated in front of an upstairs window. Simon habitually tries to shield Finn from the darker sides of life,

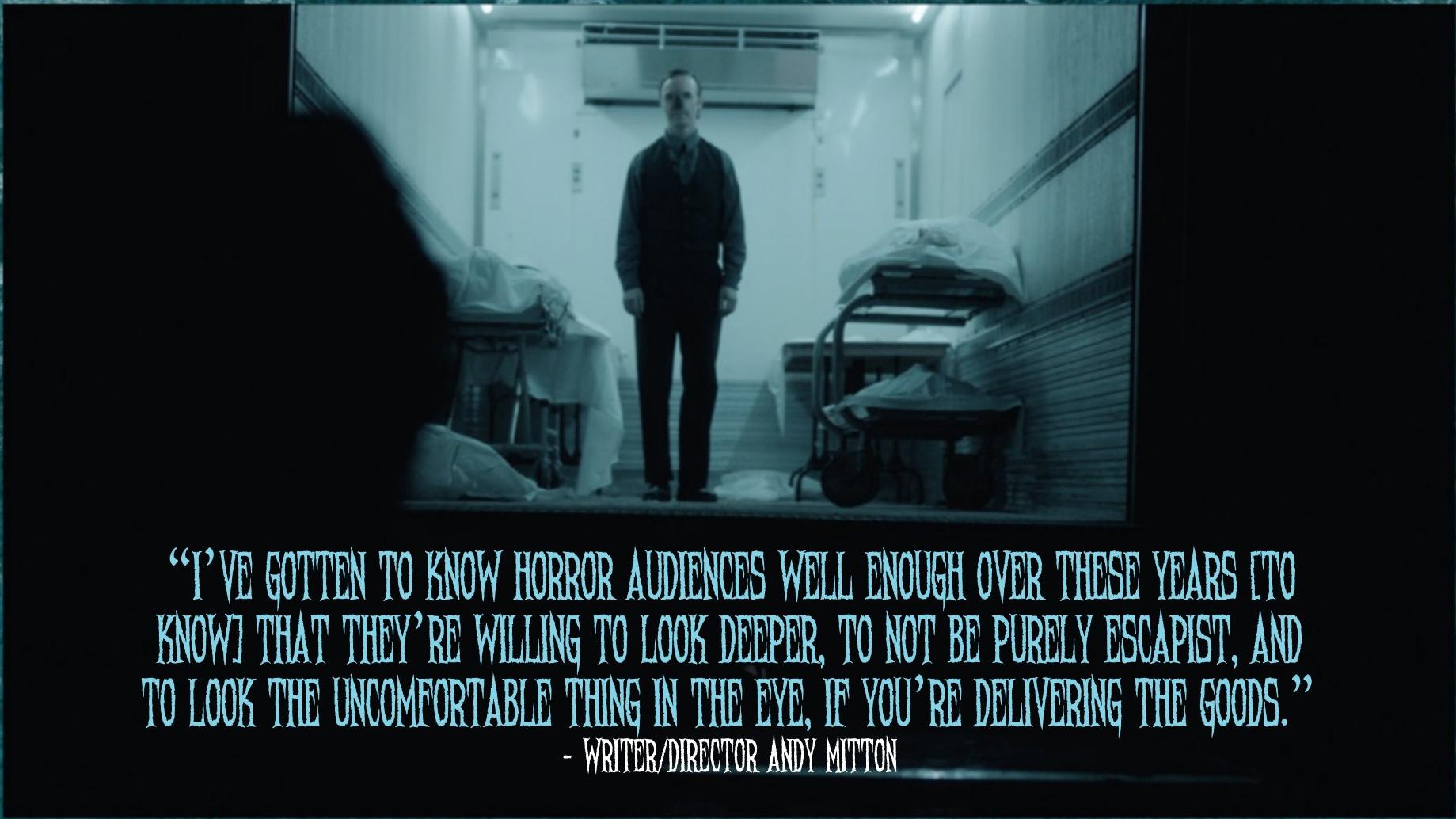


Ghost Writer: Supernatural terror is par for the course for filmmaker Andy Mitton, who cut his teeth on indie ghost stories *We Go On* and *The Witch in the Window*.

but now he's faced with a paranormal threat who confounds his attempts to protect his child.

Deftly weaving elements of domestic drama and housebound horror in *The Witch in the Window*, Mitton makes Simon's concern for Finn the crux of both sides of the story, and Draper and Tacker have a very persuasive father-son dynamic. At the same time, the film also delivers the chills; shooting in an allegedly haunted house owned by his

Middlebury alma mater, Mitton eschews the digital trickery often employed even on lower-budget ghost stories, teasing us with the anticipation of Lydia's presence and evoking shivers with simple camera moves. More than just a simple fright film, *The Witch in the Window* is about fear, what it does to people and how they cope with it – pointing the way for Mitton to delve into those notions in even greater depth in *The Harbinger*. ☠



"I'VE GOTTED TO KNOW HORROR AUDIENCES WELL ENOUGH OVER THESE YEARS [TO KNOW] THAT THEY'RE WILLING TO LOOK DEEPER, TO NOT BE PURELY ESCAPIST, AND TO LOOK THE UNCOMFORTABLE THING IN THE EYE, IF YOU'RE DELIVERING THE GOODS."

- WRITER/DIRECTOR ANDY MITTON

Bring Out Your Dead: *The Harbinger's* unsettling nightmare sequences are grim representations of our collective trauma under COVID.

Looking at The Harbinger today, even though it does go to those dark places, it's somewhat reassuring, because we're now looking back and seeing that things have gotten better since that period. Was there a sense while you were making it that hopefully, by the time it came out, we would be in a better place and be able to look back through this movie at how bad things were?

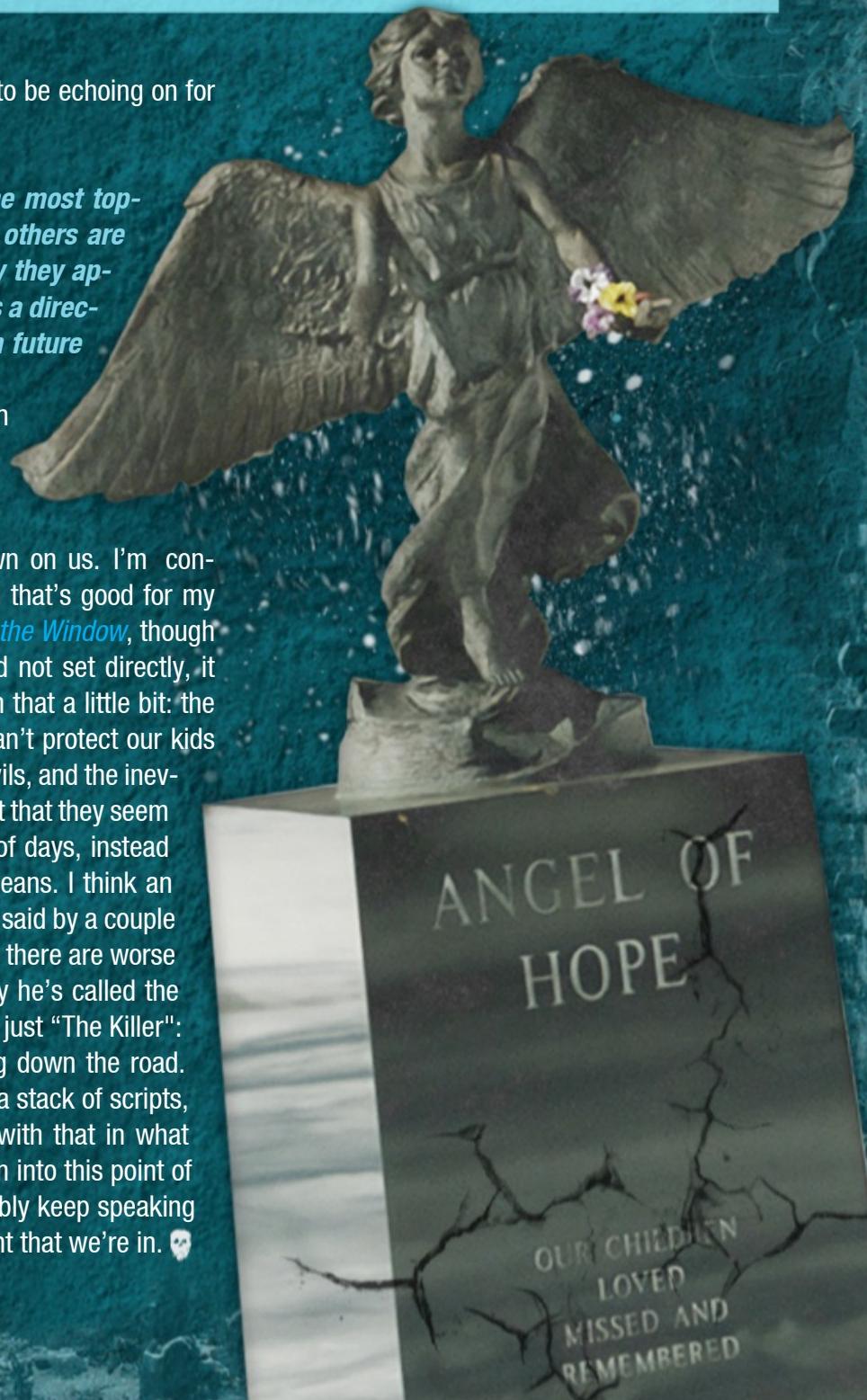
I thought about that a lot, and I wasn't even sure what the best thing for the movie would be, but I didn't let that bother me, because we were all at such a dreadful time. In fact, if you could show a picture of us right now to the version of me when I started – that we would get to be in person at a festival again, congregating in the dark to celebrate movies again – we were hoping that that would be the result, because at the same time we had friends who were getting into SXSW and being sent home and things were going online. I think the community did a great job getting through it, but this is exactly what we were hoping for. I don't know if it'll feel too soon, or what the distance will feel like for people. There were people who told me at the script level, "Put this in a parallel world; if there's some way to separate this from what we're actually going through, it might help." And I just thought, no, this is going to be as valid a place to set a film, going into the future, as any other historical period we might choose to feed our themes with and lift our stories with. I didn't think it would hurt the timelessness or date the movie at all; I think

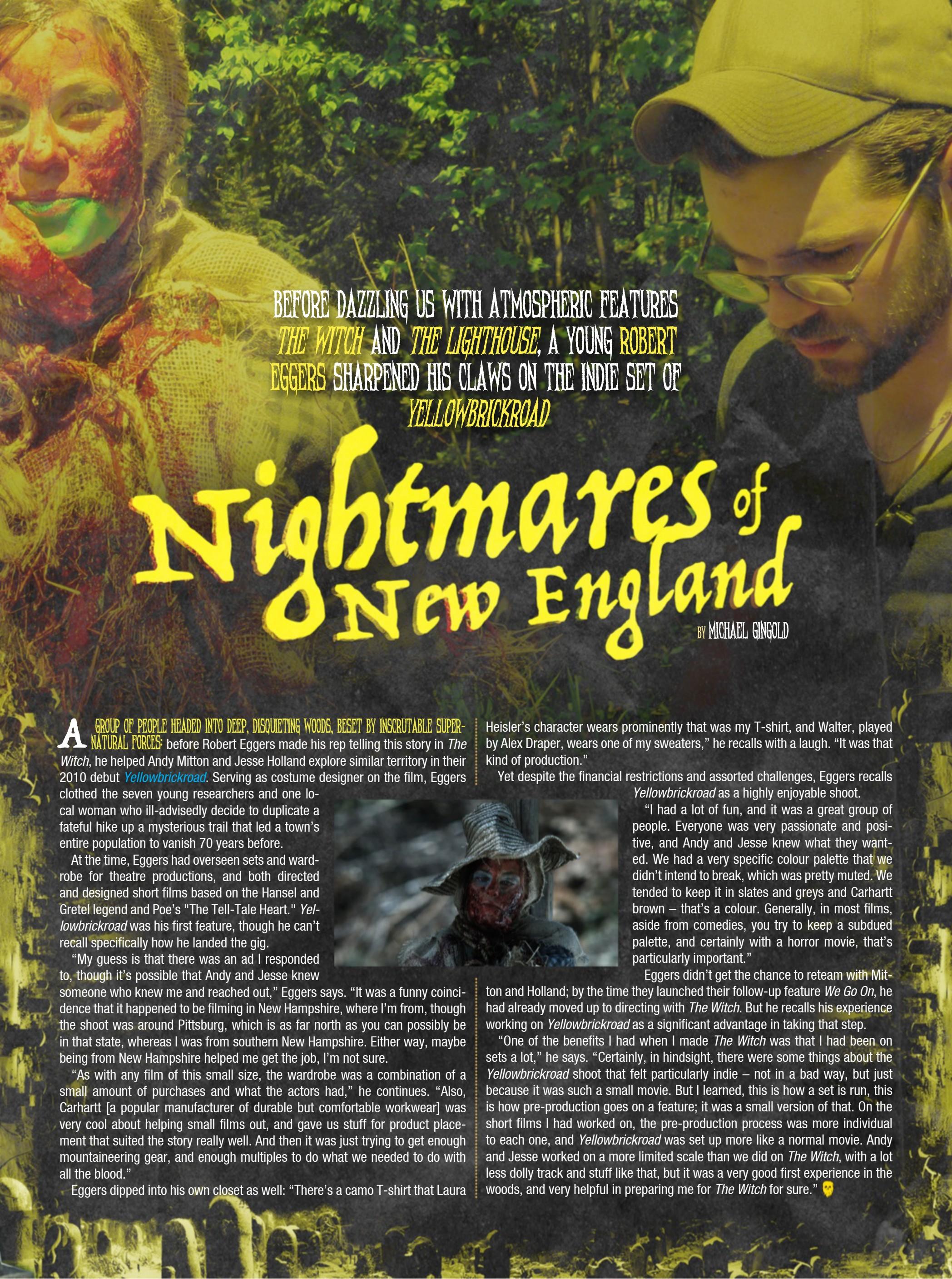
this is, unfortunately, going to be echoing on for many, many years.

The Harbinger is easily the most topical film you've done; the others are sort of timeless in the way they approach their stories. Is this a direction you want to pursue in future films?

I think so. My point of friction that I draw on as an artist is, I'm a relentless optimist.

But I also can't help seeing the apocalypse coming down on us. I'm constantly having that war, and that's good for my movies. I think *The Witch in the Window*, though it was a different movie and not set directly, it was me starting to deal with that a little bit: the evils of the world that we can't protect our kids from, and the rise of those evils, and the inevitability that we have to admit that they seem to be getting stronger a lot of days, instead of weaker, and what that means. I think an echo in *The Harbinger* that's said by a couple of characters is the idea that there are worse things coming. Which is why he's called the Harbinger, and why he's not just "The Killer": he speaks to what's coming down the road. And I know, because I have a stack of scripts, and I'm continuing to deal with that in what I'm writing now. So yeah, I'm into this point of friction, and I think I'll probably keep speaking to a more immediate moment that we're in. ☠





BEFORE DAZZLING US WITH ATMOSPHERIC FEATURES
THE WITCH AND *THE LIGHTHOUSE*, A YOUNG ROBERT EGGERS SHARPENED HIS CLAWS ON THE INDIE SET OF
YELLOWBRICKROAD

Nightmares of New England

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

A GROUP OF PEOPLE HEADED INTO DEEP, DISQUIETING WOODS, BESET BY INSCRUTABLE SUPER-NATURAL FORCES before Robert Eggers made his rep telling this story in *The Witch*, he helped Andy Mitton and Jesse Holland explore similar territory in their 2010 debut *Yellowbrickroad*. Serving as costume designer on the film, Eggers clothed the seven young researchers and one local woman who ill-advisedly decide to duplicate a fateful hike up a mysterious trail that led a town's entire population to vanish 70 years before.

At the time, Eggers had overseen sets and wardrobe for theatre productions, and both directed and designed short films based on the Hansel and Gretel legend and Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." *Yellowbrickroad* was his first feature, though he can't recall specifically how he landed the gig.

"My guess is that there was an ad I responded to, though it's possible that Andy and Jesse knew someone who knew me and reached out," Eggers says. "It was a funny coincidence that it happened to be filming in New Hampshire, where I'm from, though the shoot was around Pittsburgh, which is as far north as you can possibly be in that state, whereas I was from southern New Hampshire. Either way, maybe being from New Hampshire helped me get the job, I'm not sure."

"As with any film of this small size, the wardrobe was a combination of a small amount of purchases and what the actors had," he continues. "Also, Carhartt [a popular manufacturer of durable but comfortable workwear] was very cool about helping small films out, and gave us stuff for product placement that suited the story really well. And then it was just trying to get enough mountaineering gear, and enough multiples to do what we needed to do with all the blood."

Eggers dipped into his own closet as well: "There's a camo T-shirt that Laura

Heisler's character wears prominently that was my T-shirt, and Walter, played by Alex Draper, wears one of my sweaters," he recalls with a laugh. "It was that kind of production."

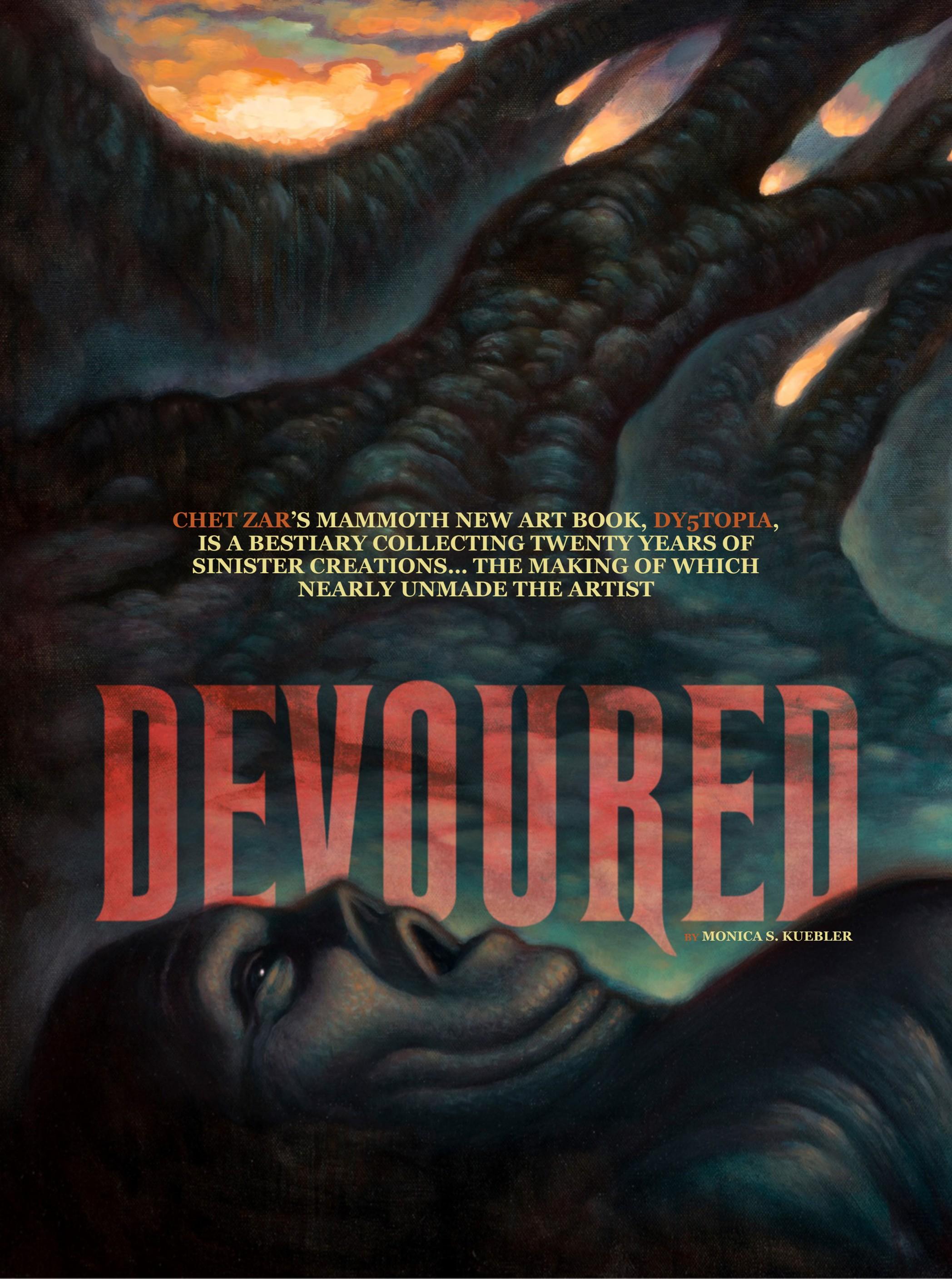
Yet despite the financial restrictions and assorted challenges, Eggers recalls *Yellowbrickroad* as a highly enjoyable shoot.

"I had a lot of fun, and it was a great group of people. Everyone was very passionate and positive, and Andy and Jesse knew what they wanted. We had a very specific colour palette that we didn't intend to break, which was pretty muted. We tended to keep it in slates and greys and Carhartt brown – that's a colour. Generally, in most films, aside from comedies, you try to keep a subdued palette, and certainly with a horror movie, that's particularly important."

Eggers didn't get the chance to reteam with Mitton and Holland; by the time they launched their follow-up feature *We Go On*, he had already moved up to directing with *The Witch*. But he recalls his experience working on *Yellowbrickroad* as a significant advantage in taking that step.

"One of the benefits I had when I made *The Witch* was that I had been on sets a lot," he says. "Certainly, in hindsight, there were some things about the *Yellowbrickroad* shoot that felt particularly indie – not in a bad way, but just because it was such a small movie. But I learned, this is how a set is run, this is how pre-production goes on a feature; it was a small version of that. On the short films I had worked on, the pre-production process was more individual to each one, and *Yellowbrickroad* was set up more like a normal movie. Andy and Jesse worked on a more limited scale than we did on *The Witch*, with a lot less dolly track and stuff like that, but it was a very good first experience in the woods, and very helpful in preparing me for *The Witch* for sure."





CHET ZAR'S MAMMOTH NEW ART BOOK, **DY5TOPIA**,
IS A BESTIARY COLLECTING TWENTY YEARS OF
SINISTER CREATIONS... THE MAKING OF WHICH
NEARLY UNMADE THE ARTIST

DEVOURED

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER



Chet Zar has had two careers most horror fans would envy, beginning with a twenty-year stint in special effects that kicked off when he was still a teenager, during which he worked on films such as *Hocus Pocus*, 2001's *Planet of the Apes*, the *Hellboy* franchise, and *The Ring Two*, while also creating visuals for the band *Tool* and, later, a second one painting haunting fine art portraits of monsters. However, the transition between the two was not without its challenges.

"I was like 'Okay, I'm going to be a fine artist, I'm going to commit to this and do it,'" Zar tells *Rue Morgue*. "And then I sat down [to paint] and I was like 'Okay, what the fuck do I do?' I had no idea because I was used to being art directed for fifteen years in the film industry. So I dabbled around and the stuff I was doing was all kind of dark, but it was such an extreme change from being essentially a commercial artist in effects – I wanted it to be not commercial at all. I wanted it to be real and pure, like true art, and so I thought, the most pure and true I was as an artist was when I was a little kid drawing monsters, because you did it because it was fun and you didn't have any other reason. So I thought, 'I'm going to just try painting monsters because that feels like the most fun thing to do.'"

Zar's monsters sometimes don top hats and gas masks, some take the form of decrepit robots or phantasmagoric spectres or misshapen mutants or undead with skulls exposed, and then there are the other, stranger, much less describable beings; all – even the unseeing – stare out from the artist's oil paintings and sculptures enigmatically, coaxing viewers to step closer, look deeper, and try to decipher what inner torment they carry. Toward this end, Zar's new book, *Dy5topia Volume One: A Field Guide to the Dark Universe of Chet Zar* (available at chetzar.bigcartel.com), aims to provide some illumination.

"One of the things that we kept hearing from all of the interviews were people saying, 'The characters he paints look related or something'...or 'He's painting from another dimension,'" says Zar of feedback he received while making the 2015 documentary *Chet Zar: I Like to Paint Monsters* with writer/filmmaker Mike Correll, who provides the text for *Dy5topia*. "I'd been hearing that here and there for years, but I'd never really thought much about it because my process has always been totally intuitive; I'm just painting something that looks cool. Seriously, it's that simple. I had no intention of creating a world."

But once the idea had been planted – first by artist Christopher Ulrich's

(Cont'd on p.24)



**S. ELIZABETH TAKES READERS ON A GUIDED TOUR
THROUGH CENTURIES OF DARK ART IN HER NEW
HARDCOVER *THE ART OF DARKNESS***

PAINT IT, BLACK

BY
MONICA S. KUEBLER

It could be argued that dark art has been with us since humanity first drew images of the hunt and other matters of life and death on cave walls. But what's without dispute is that in the ensuing millennia, people have remained profoundly fascinated by it. Some of the world's most well-known fine art falls into this category, including Hieronymus Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (1490-1500), Henry Fuseli's "The Nightmare" (1781), Francisco Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son" (1819-23), Utagawa Kuniyoshi's "Takiyasha the Witch and the Skeleton Spectre" (c.1844), Otto Müller's "Lucretia, or the Nude Murderess" (c.1903), and Frida Kahlo's "The Wounded Deer" (1946). All of these and many more have been reproduced in full colour in S. Elizabeth's *The Art of Darkness: A Treasury of the Morbid, Melancholic and Macabre* (out now from Frances Lincoln).

"Ever since I learned as a child that we all at some point experience unpleasant feelings or behaviours or conditions, whether that be fright –

which I experienced to a great degree – or fury, melancholy or misery, sadness or sickness, I have been fascinated by how we describe and communicate these things, these darker aspects of the human condition – especially as it relates to language and visuals, and in particular the way these things are depicted in art," says the author of what drew her to the project. "I think part of my fascination comes from the fact that I am *terrible* at articulating my feelings and I love the idea that sometimes our art can say all of the things that we can't."

Elizabeth's hardcover divides hundreds of years of unsettling and macabre art into four easily digestible sections (It's All In Your Mind, The Human Condition, The World Around Us, and Visions From Beyond). Each section houses three subsections that further thematically organize the selections; within The Human Condition, for instance, there are Ailments & Afflictions, encompassing paintings illustrating disease and treatment; Depravity & Destruction, where murderers reign supreme; and Matters Of Mortality,



Dark Delicacies: (Opposite) "La Llorona" by Jaime Aelavanthara, and (clockwise from top left) "Twilight" by Rachael Bridge, "Night Terrors" by David Whitlam, and "Young Yaga" by Nadezda.

featuring renderings of skulls and skeletons in formats ranging from paintings ("Vanitas Still Life" by Jan van Kessel, c.1665-70) to sculpture (Damien Hirst's "For the Love of God," a reproduction of a human skull comprised of platinum, diamonds, and real teeth). Each section and subsection opens with a short intro, giving a brief overview of the theme and how it's been explored in art. Here, Elizabeth often asks semi-rhetorical questions of her readers ("Could it be that artists are merely filling a demand?"), as if suggesting these be kept in mind as one moves through the galleries. In fact, *The Art of Darkness* is not unlike a guided tour.

But getting all the art she wanted for this tour was another matter entirely.

"The challenges crop up right at the beginning," she explains, "because while I might be rabid to include a certain artist, the idea might be nixed before the process has even started! And then of course you've got to get permissions for all of the artworks you want to use, and it is a freaking process which can take as long as writing the book itself ... [S]ometimes you don't always hear back from the artists you reach out to – I reached out to *so many* and now I'm never going to get upset when I don't hear back from someone again. I am immune."

The process is further complicated by the fact that some artists have difficult agents or high licensing fees that fall outside of the project's budget; others are deceased, which means having to negotiate with their estate. And sometimes, a request is simply denied. Elizabeth notes that even public domain artworks can pose

a problem if you can't get an image file in the necessary resolution.

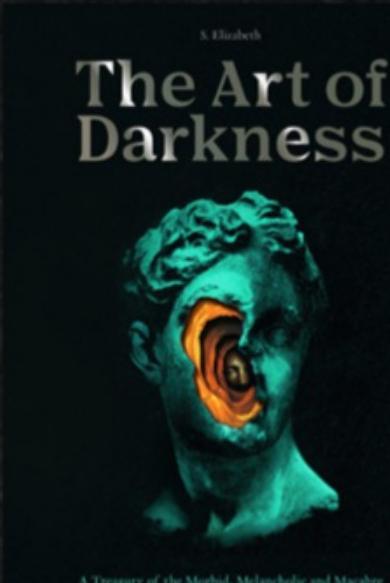
Curation challenges aside, there's no shortage of striking artwork and spectacular talent on display here. What might prove surprising to some readers is the sheer number of contemporary dark artists that Elizabeth was able to include. For those not dialed into the art world, discoveries aplenty await, including Germany's Jana Heidersdorf, Iran's Shirin Neshat, Argentina's Santiago Caruso, Brits David Whitlam and Stephen Mackey, and Americans Aron Wiesenfeld and Chris Mrozik.

"Allow me to sing you the praises of Tumblr," she says of how she stumbled upon much of this modern talent. "I began paying attention to the things that other users shared, and I'd encounter all sorts of dark treasures that would send me scurrying down midnight rabbit holes. But most of the time it sent me scurrying furiously because it would be an incredible image with absolutely no other information attached to it. From the outset, I noticed a disturbing trend that runs rampant on Tumblr and other micro-blogging platforms: the sharing of imagery sans credit or context. I think my heart's true answer to your question is 'I found these artists out of spite.' Every time I saw someone include the words 'artist unknown' with their

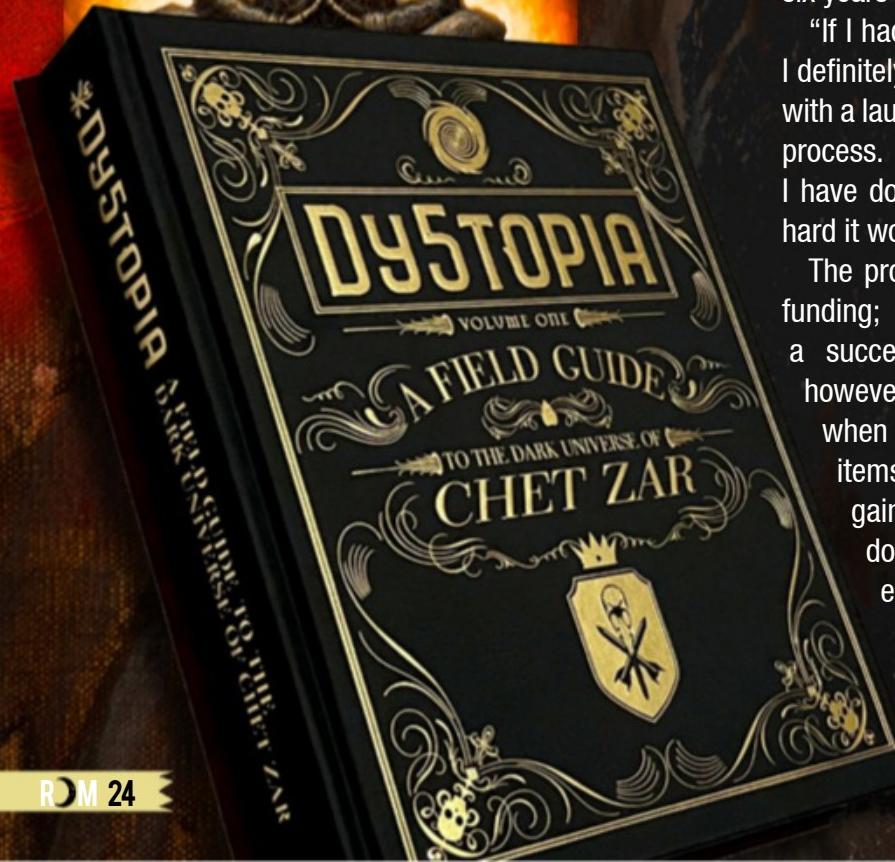
post, I was emboldened to prove them wrong."

After spending the last few years investigating several centuries of dark art, one can't help but wonder if Elizabeth noticed any trends – or perhaps even an evolution of sorts – regarding how artists approach the darker side of human existence in their work.

"As stigmas and taboos change, as societal attitudes shift, so too do depictions of those things in our art," she notes. "Mental illness, for example, was at one time portrayed in terms of the religious spectacle of possession, or we might gawk at the filth and chaos of Goya's 'The Madhouse' or 'Yard With Lunatics,' painted at a time where the mentally ill were hidden away in horrifying asylums. Melancholia was portrayed as 'noble suffering' and up until present day people still talk about the 'tortured artist' with reverence and admiration. I do think that is starting to change, that people are viewing mental illness through a more compassionate lens, that we're all realizing the romanticization or the fetishizing of the tortured artist is a harmful mindset. And visually there's a lot of art out there right now, all styles and genres, that reflect these changing perspectives. But there's always going to be fucked-up people bringing their fucked-up experiences to the canvas, I don't think that's ever, ever going to change."



A Treasury of the Morbid, Melancholic and Macabre



suggestion that Zar should make a “dungeon master guide,” and then reinforced by the documentary interviews – he came to the realization that this *was* a world he’d been painting, a whole other dimension that became known as Dy5topia. And he did know some things about it, nebulous as they may be. The concept developed into a Kickstarter campaign that took a whopping six years to deliver on.

“If I had known [how long it would take], I definitely wouldn’t have done it,” Zar says with a laugh. “I suffered so much during the process. It was so painful. No way would I have done it if I would have known how hard it would be. It was terrible.”

The problem with Kickstarter wasn’t the funding; with Correll’s help, the duo ran a successful campaign. The missteps, however, began almost from the start, when Zar kept adding more and more items for supporters as the Kickstarter gained popularity – “stuff that wasn’t done yet,” he admits – and nearly ended up drowning himself in extra commitments. Worse, once he sat down to work on the book, another problem arose. This one

much more catastrophic.

“I could not visualize it,” he confesses, “so Mike [was] helping me. He started interviewing me, and he interviewed me about every painting, sorted all the information that I intuitively knew for sure about each painting, and from that we figured out all the categories and the class structure and this and that. He wrote it all out, but I couldn’t see it. I’m visually oriented; I have to see it in my mind. I couldn’t figure out a way to organize it graphically and I struggled. It must have been three years where I was trying different things. It was a total nightmare.”

A time came when the project was not only keeping Zar up at night, it was also turning into a money pit. He needed to take on other work to pay the bills, which only distracted him further. At last, he printed out all the images and Correll’s text, “just to have something to look at,” and finally it all clicked.

But no sooner had one problem been solved, when another turned up: because *Dy5topia* was taking so long, Zar felt compelled to deliver an especially high-quality product.

“I was adding more stuff and it kept go-



ing longer and longer and then I made this huge mistake, which is why it's four hundred pages," he explains, adding that his blunder was quite hilarious, in retrospect.

"[Graphic designer Mackie Osborne] was sending me back PDFs and so every page is two pages, right? And I'm looking at the PDF document and I'm like, 'Okay, it's only 100-and-something pages' – I didn't realize that meant it was 200-and-something pages, because it's two pages a spread – that's how stupid I am," he says, laughing. "It got to the point where it was like, 'Okay, we're almost at 200 pages; I said it was going to be around 200 pages,' and then I realized 'Oh shit, that's almost 400 pages.' So, of course, the book cost twice as much to print. Twice as much to ship. I charged like \$40 USD for this book back then and now it's a \$100 book. It almost bankrupted me."

Thankfully it didn't, as the resulting oversized hardcover is a thing of not only macabre beauty but also substantial heft, clocking in at 380 thick full-colour pages, with a gold-foiled debossed cover and all the art within given the full-page treatment. *Dy5topia* compiles and catalogues dozens of the artist's monster portraits, giving each creature a class, type, and region of habitation. The brief accompanying text provides a further glimpse into the lives and purposes of the often-tormented beings that Zar commits to canvas. For those who might find themselves con-

cerned, *Dy5topia* doesn't dispel any of the sinister magic of the art, rather it adds a complex, interwoven back story that's full of mysteries of its own. Flipping through the pages of the book is like getting a glimpse of another world – a sinister, dangerous, and haunting one – and understanding only a mere fraction of it. But fear not, there's more to come. Despite the nightmare experience, Zar has no intention of abandoning the concept.

"I SUFFERED SO MUCH DURING THE PROCESS. IT WAS SO PAINFUL. NO WAY WOULD I HAVE DONE IT IF I WOULD HAVE KNOWN HOW HARD IT WOULD BE."

– CHET ZAR

"I'm definitely going to do a *Volume Two*," he says. "That's the cool thing about this: I don't know what the world is until I paint paintings. Every painting is like a clue to the world a little bit more, and it's so fun and exciting. Like these zombie deathbots – I imagine these robots that were made from cadavers, that was the concept.

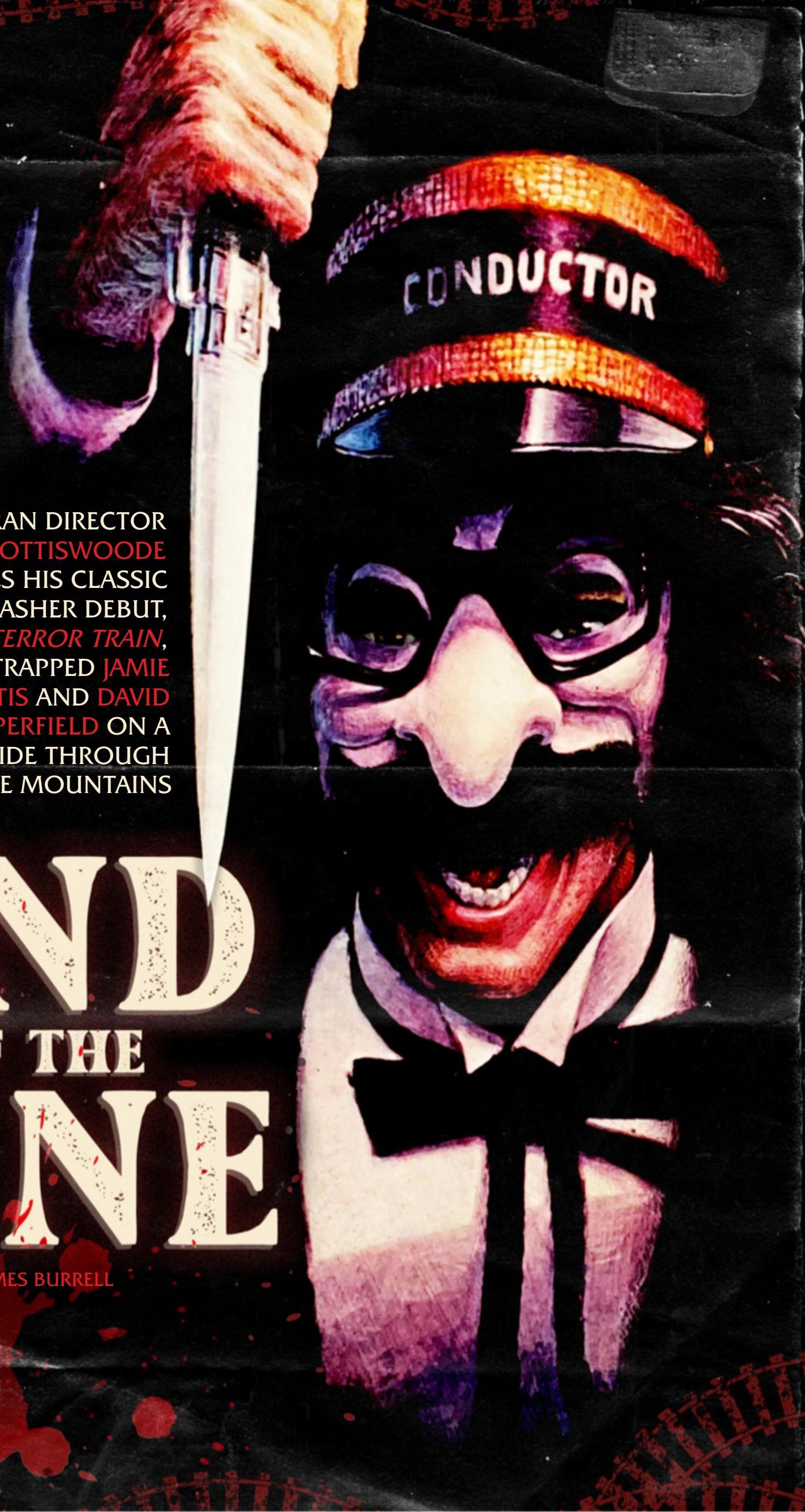
I didn't know that existed in *Dy5topia* at all, but by following my creative impulse, and just following what I think would make a cool painting, then I discover what else is in *Dy5topia*, and so the series can go on forever, as long as I'm alive."

While the book project kept Zar undeniably busy this last half decade, he did find time to launch a podcast, *Dark Art Society*, back in March 2017 – again with Correll – about a subject close to his heart. Five years and 260 episodes in, the show is still going strong, perhaps because at the time of its inception it filled a gaping void in the podcasting world.

"We started talking about paranormal stuff, the occult, stuff we're into, dreams, magic, art, dark art – nobody was talking about dark art at the time," he says. "Everybody was calling it dark art but there was no podcast for it, so we started interviewing friends of mine who were dark artists and we started talking about it. Then Mike had to leave the podcast and it was just me, so I started inviting artists on. This was after maybe episode 80 when he left, and then it became an interview show; every week, there is a new dark artist on."

Among those featured on *Dark Art Society* are author Mitch Horowitz, Brom, Chris Marrs, Ron English, and many others.

"[Dark art] is kind of a small niche thing," says Zar, but there's a lot of people into it." ☠



VETERAN DIRECTOR
ROGER SPOTTISWOODE
RECALLS HIS CLASSIC
CANUCK SLASHER DEBUT,
1980'S *TERROR TRAIN*,
WHICH TRAPPED JAMIE
LEE CURTIS AND DAVID
COPPERFIELD ON A
DOOMED RIDE THROUGH
THE MOUNTAINS

END OF THE LINE

BY JAMES BURRELL

Following the success of John Carpenter's 1978 low-budget sensation *Halloween*, many saw an opportunity to capitalize on that film's killer-in-a-mask formula by producing their own stalk-and-slash flicks. Among these was the 1980 Canadian-made cult classic *Terror Train*, featuring *Halloween*'s final girl and horrordom's newly crowned scream queen, Jamie Lee Curtis. Originally conceived by the film's executive producer Daniel Grodnik as "Halloween on a train," the movie (a remake of which has been produced by the streaming service Tubi and recently premiered on the platform) may have been initially dismissed by some critics as a derivative knock-off, but Roger Spottiswoode's claustrophobic directorial debut endures as a unique entry in the slasher subgenre and, 42 years later, remains perfect viewing for a cold night.

At a New Year's Eve celebration, a group of Sigma Phi fraternity brothers, led by the arrogant "Doc" Manley (Hart Bochner), play a cruel prank on shy pledge Kenny Hampson (Derek MacKinnon), in which they arrange a sexual encounter for him with sorority sister Alana Maxwell (Curtis) – only to substitute a dismembered medical corpse in her place. Fast-forward three years, and the pre-med students are ringing in the new year by holding a masquerade party aboard an excursion train, with a live band and a magician (David Copperfield!) to provide the entertainment. But unknown to the partiers, a costumed killer is also on the moving train and begins picking them off – one drunk reveller has his face smashed into a washroom mirror and is partially dismembered; another partygoer has her throat slashed on a top berth; yet another is decapitated, with his corpse and head stuffed inside a sleeper compartment – cleverly avoiding detection by donning the disguise of each successive victim. Is the murderer a revenge-seeking Kenny, who had to be hospitalized following his traumatic incident three years before, or someone else?

"I was asked to write *Terror Train* because I had written *48 Hrs.*, and [*Terror Train*'s co-producer] Sandy Howard kind of knew me," says the Ottawa-born Spottiswoode, who had worked as an editor on several Sam Peckinpah films, including the controversial 1971 thriller *Straw Dogs*. "In fact, he had produced a [pitch] poster in which I was listed as the writer on it – we hadn't had a meeting yet, and I'm credited on the poster! Anyway, I didn't write it. I didn't think I'd write it very well. I hadn't written a horror film before, and I thought it was going to be a difficult genre."

After passing on the opportunity to write *Terror Train*'s script (eventually penned by T.Y. Drake and an uncredited Judith Rascoe), Spottiswoode was contacted again by Howard with another offer.

"Two months later, he called me back and said, 'I have the script written. Have a look at



Masquerade Macabre: *Halloween*'s Jamie Lee Curtis returns to the as-of-yet unestablished slasher genre to try to survive another deadly holiday.

it and see if you want to edit it. And I guess if you really want to, you can direct it.' So, he hired me as the director, and I immediately hired an editor."

The runaway success of *Halloween* provided a template for the as-of-yet unestablished slasher formula: a group of attractive, carousing teens oblivious to their peril are dispatched by a masked killer. But what makes the Montreal-shot *Terror Train* stand apart from its predecessor is the ever-changing appearance of the cunning murderer (whose costumes include Groucho Marx, an alien reptile, and a creepy old man), as well as its claustrophobic setting – a fast-moving train, impossible to escape.

Not only was the train setting unique – with vintage Art Deco-inspired interiors – it was authentic as well. The film was shot inside a real locomotive, complete with several passenger cars, instead of using studio sets. Spottiswoode recalls there were challenges filming inside the cramped compartments and the train's original

lighting system proved unsuitable and had to be completely rewired.

"We rented a train in upstate New York and drove it up to Montreal, to a railyard which is now a factory, but has railway lines in it," he remembers. "We shot from midday to midnight, but we were shooting in an area with other factories, so for anything shot before 6 p.m. we would hear noise and people talking in the other factories, so that later had to be looped. We also had people outside rocking the carriages so the lights would sway, and so forth. Just getting people into the [train] was difficult because the corridors were so narrow. And in those days, the cameras were big, so it was a considerable challenge. [But] If we had built the whole thing in a studio, it would have cost a vast amount of money."

Produced at the height of Canada's tax shelter era, which spanned from the 1970s to the early '80s (a period when government tax incentives to encourage filmmaking allowed those who invested in Canadian movies large tax write-offs



"Just getting people into the [train] was difficult because the corridors were so narrow. And in those days, the cameras were big, so it was a considerable challenge."

— DIRECTOR ROGER SPOTTISWOODE

on their money), *Terror Train* required Canucks to be involved in most aspects of the production. Alongside Bochner and MacKinnon, fellow Canadians Sandee Currie, singer D.D. Winters (later known as Vanity), Anthony Sherwood, and Timothy Webber were cast in supporting roles, but there were allowances for foreign actors to be brought in. Veteran American actor Ben Johnson (who won an Academy Award for his role in 1971's *The Last Picture Show*) joined the cast as the train's conductor, and of course, Curtis, who had just wrapped up shooting on *Prom Night* in Toronto a couple of months prior, brought substantial genre credibility to the project.

"[Curtis was] extremely good, extremely nice, and very thoughtful," recalls Spottiswoode of the young star, who performs one of the genre's best chase scenes in *Terror Train*. "She grew up with two people who made films [parents Janet Leigh and Tony Curtis]. They were very respected actors in the film world, so she was very well behaved and very professional. We had a young cast and she was by far the most experienced. She was very generous in making other people be as good as they could be. She made the film possible, and by having this largely inexperienced group of actors around her, she made them terrific."

Another up-and-coming star was a young David Copperfield, appearing as the Magician, with viewers being treated to several instances of the illusionist performing various magic acts. The man who would go on to become the most commercially successful magician in history was apprehensive at first, worried that the camera's keen eye might catch what is easier to conceal when performing onstage. But Spottiswoode had some tricks of his own up his sleeve; namely, the legendary Oscar-winning British cameraman John Alcott, whose groundbreaking work for Stanley Kubrick on *The Shining* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* proved he had the camera skills required to turn Copperfield's practical illusions into real movie magic.

"[Copperfield] wasn't yet famous at that point," he says. "He was very concerned before he came on board about what we were going to ask him to do. It was worked out so the camera couldn't see his wires. Everything we had on screen was done very carefully so the camera couldn't see [the mechanics behind the illusions]. Of course, it's easier doing it for the camera than doing it in front of an audience, because the audience is all around, while you can position a camera [in a specific place]. But you do have to get it right and make sure everything works well."

Picked up for distribution and promoted heavily by Twentieth Century-Fox, when *Terror Train* (which was produced for \$3.5 million dollars) was released in October of 1980, it earned \$8 million in ticket sales. Despite its modest box office performance, the movie has grown in popularity over the decades, with a fanbase of both long-time and new slasher aficionados declaring their love for its memorable costumes, the lush, Genie Award-nominated score by composer John Mills-Cockell (*The Clown Murders*, *Humongous*), magic sequences, Curtis's dynamic performance, and a more subtle approach to the murders. The now 77-year-old Spottiswoode, who went on to direct such films as the James Bond entry *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), has confessed to not being a big horror film fan and admits that it was his decision to refrain from being too graphic with the killings.

"Despite the fact I had worked with Peckinpah and did a Bond film, I'm not one for onscreen violence," he affirms. "I think you can imply violence, but you don't have to wallow in it. I didn't want to have all the blood and gore that are in the other films. But I tried to make it work in other ways and the magic [aspect] was a good part of that."

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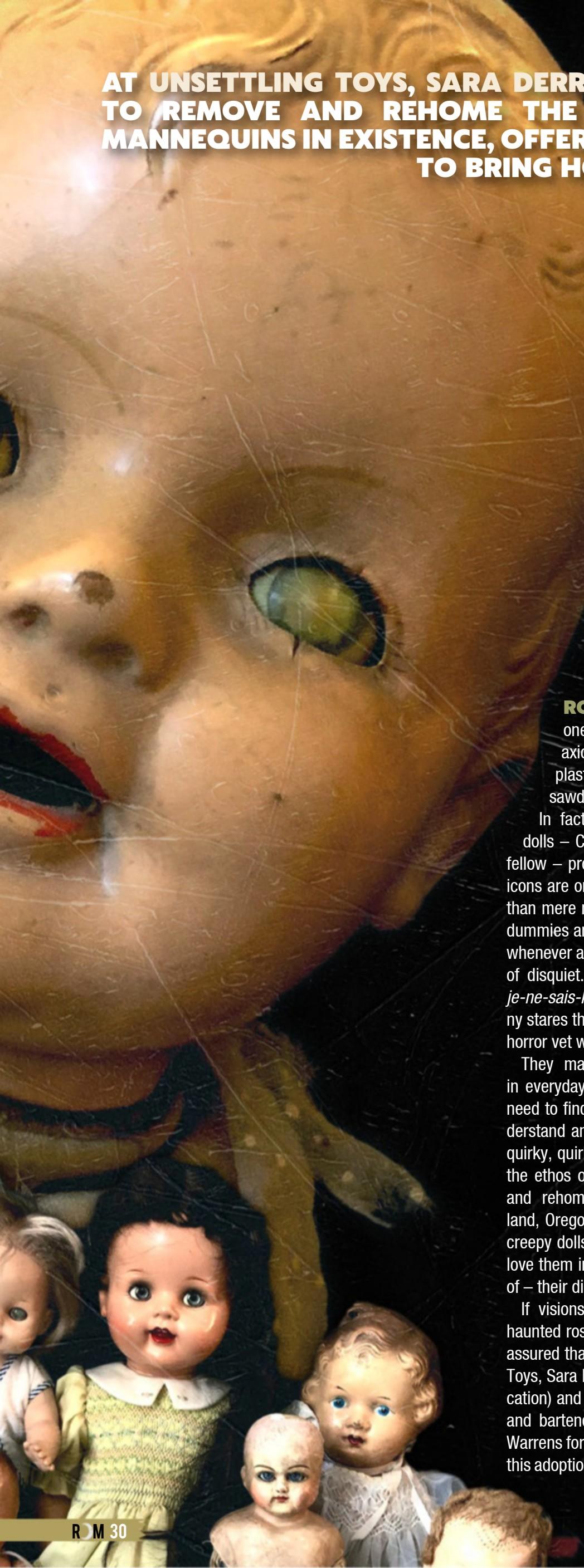
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AT UNSETTLING TOYS, SARA DERRICKSON AND BRIAN JILLSON WORK TO REMOVE AND REHOME THE CREEPIEST DOLLS, PUPPETS, AND MANNEQUINS IN EXISTENCE, OFFERING COLLECTORS A UNIQUE CHANCE TO BRING HORROR HOME

Haunted & Adopted

BY STACIE PONDER

**A T SOME POINT IN OUR TEN-
URES AS HOR-
ROR LOVERS,** we all learn

one of the genre's most enduring axioms: that even if it's made of plastic and packed with fluff or sawdust, a tiny terror is a terror still.

In fact, some of horror's deadliest dolls – Chucky or that little Zuni fetish fellow – prove that many of our greatest icons are only knee-high in stature. More than mere murderers, however, dolls and dummies are also easy go-to set dressing whenever a scene needs that special dash of disquiet. There's just something very *je-ne-sais-kill* about their hollow, uncanny stares that can keep even the heartiest horror vet wide awake long into the night.

They may terrorize us onscreen but in everyday life, these misfit toys simply need to find the right owner who will understand and appreciate their horrifyingly quirky, quirkily horrifying charms. Such is the ethos of *Unsettling Toys*, a "removal and rehoming" service based in Portland, Oregon (where else?), that matches creepy dolls and toys with those who will love them in spite of – or maybe because of – their disquieting nature.

If visions of the Occult Museum and haunted rosaries dance in your head, rest assured that the couple behind Unsettling Toys, Sara Derrickson (who works in education) and Brian Jillson (a cheese-maker and bartender), are not trying to be the Warrens for a new generation. They began this adoption agency-for-oddities as a side

hustle in early 2019 – spurred on, in part, by Sara's encounter with a strange stuffed bunny who would come to be known as Mr. Creeperton, the company's red-eyed, carrot-clutching mascot.

"I was helping a friend clean out her late mother-in-law's home," she recalls. "Under a bed, I found Creeperton. He was so bizarre. The family all took turns accusing each other of creating him but, in the end, it turned out that nobody had ever seen him before."

Creeperton was tossed in the trash, but Derrickson's thoughts kept turning to him. She decided to take him home, but Creeperton may have taken matters into his own shabby paws.

"I couldn't find him in the trash bag, and I gave up. Before I left, I saw him... not in the trash bag where we had thrown him, but on the stairs to the kids' room!"

Currently available adoptees are listed on the company's website at unsettlingtoys.com, and come with a fee that includes shipping within the U.S. and an official "certificate of adoption and rehoming," complete with fancy wax seal. But bringing your very own bizarre doll into your life isn't as simple as adding the dead-eyed Calista or the nightmare-inducing raggedy Gretchen to your shopping cart and checking out. It's a bit of a process, beginning with an email conversation. Unsettling Toys is more a match-making service than a typical store, and as such they want to ensure that you and the toy that catches your eye are well-suited to one another. To this end, Jillson and

Derrickson collects back stories for any eerie inventory that is sent to them, including historical information or notable reactions previous owners may have had. They share these back stories with those interested in adopting – particularly any that might be considered dangerous for the superstitious lot.

"The only requirement is that the person appreciate the toy and feel a connection with it," says Derrickson, "[but] if the toy has a back story that may be concerning, then we make sure the client has some experience with possible attachments."

To accommodate this, prospective adopters are welcome to bring a psychic along to a Zoom meeting interview to get a read on any toy to make sure it's all good and free from any negative juju. After all, you wouldn't want to bring a doll into your home only to find an entity within it has ill intentions toward your child or your pets... or you.

Many of Unsettling Toys' clients are experienced in "cleaning" these more risky items, and they may be the best suited to "give love, understanding, and assistance to entities that have been labelled as bad," explains Derrickson. However, she stresses that Unsettling Toys is not strictly in the business of selling haunted dolls.

"Although some of our toys come with pretty intense back stories, we actually never guarantee if a doll is haunted or not," she says. "We share the information we have, and people have to make their own decisions about if a toy is a good fit for them. It would be disrespectful and presumptuous of us to taint the original owner's story with our own beliefs, so we pass on information as we receive it."

"IF THE TOY HAS A BACK STORY THAT MAY BE CONCERNING, THEN WE MAKE SURE THE CLIENT HAS SOME EXPERIENCE WITH POSSIBLE ATTACHMENTS."

- UNSETTLING TOYS CO-FOUNDER SARA DERRICKSON

Haunted or no, these stories can certainly enter the realm of the weird, as was the case with Sanguan: a marionette whose puppeteer owner put him up for adoption when he "changed the mood in the room" so much that the owner was disturbed by it. Sanguan was snatched up quickly and, at last report, is residing happily in Maine, where all Stephen King fans know nothing weird



Pall For A Doll: The owners of Unsettling Toys pose with their eerie, ever-growing inventory, and the company's mascot, Mr. Creeperton (inset).



ever happens.

Other dolls come with more touching stories, like a group of vintage Shrinkin' Violettes, who are in need of a "respectful and loving home." They might look eerie, but they also provided great comfort to their former owner, who worked in hospice and relied on the Violettes as part of her support system after days of difficult work.

Given all the strange energies and relentlessly staring plastic eyeballs their business brings, it's no wonder that the couple has noticed a few unusual occurrences around the house, such as hearing spontaneous music box sounds, seeing shadows, and a general feeling of being watched. Still, they don't take any particular precautions to safeguard themselves against potential paranormal mischief, and no one is sequestered away behind, say, protective Catholic glass à la Annabelle. So far, no doll has been turned away from their service; all potential adoptees have been welcomed at Unsettling Toys to await their forever homes. As for why people send their dolls off to be rehomed in the first place, Jillson and Derrickson think it all comes down to love, fear... or guilt.

"Love, like [in the case of] the Violettes, means they care about the toy and want it to find



a new life with someone who appreciates it," explains Derrickson. "Fear usually means the toy has frightened them and they fear consequences if they throw it away. Guilt comes into play with the historic nature of many of our toys; if it has been in the family for generations, people often feel better about getting rid of it if they know that it will be treasured by a new owner."

Proof that there's something rather earnest and heartwarming at the centre of Unsettling Toys, where each of these disturbingly smiling faces wind up loved and appreciated instead of rotting in a landfill. After all, one person's terror is another person's treasure.



CINEMACABRE

FILM + DVD + REISSUES



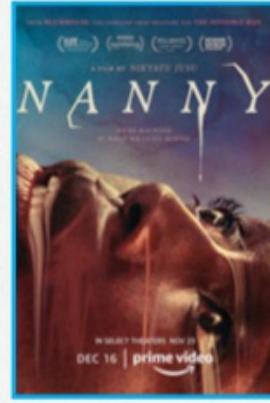
AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

NANNY

Starring Anna Diop, Michelle Monaghan and Sinqua Walls
Written and directed by Nikyatu Jusu
Amazon Studios/Blumhouse

Working as a big-city domestic can have its tensions and terrors without the intrusion of the supernatural, and *Nanny* is less a full-blown horror film in this vein than of the similarly themed *His House*. When Aisha (Anna Diop), the African immigrant at the centre of Nikyatu Jusu's accomplished debut feature, takes a job caring for the little daughter of a white, upscale Manhattan couple, the threats she faces are small, everyday, prosaic ones, any one of which could upset the life she's trying to build for herself.

There's a built-in irony to Aisha's circumstances, as she has had to leave her son Lamine (Jahleel Kamara) behind in Senegal, in the care of an increasingly untrustworthy aunt, to travel to New York City and look after someone else's child. This girl, Rose (Rose Decker), is a sweetheart; more problematic are her parents, particularly Amy (Michelle Monaghan), a control freak in a strained marriage with the often-absent Adam (Morgan Spector). She appears welcoming at first but quickly



reveals a condescending side, and eventually begins shortchanging Aisha on her pay. Frustrated on multiple fronts, Aisha starts having disturbing visions involving ominous water imagery and figures from African folklore, which are a small but potent part of the emotionally expansive picture Jusu paints.

In collaboration with cinematographer Rina Yang, Jusu paints it beautifully, demonstrating a command of her craft that belies her first-timer status. *Nanny* is less scary than emotionally unsettling, as Aisha navigates a work situation that could be undone by a single mistake – losing track of Rose one day at a park, for example. Diop is a hugely compelling lead, well-supported by the cast and Sinqua Walls in particular, as a doorman with whom Aisha makes a romantic connection. Their warm, happy moments together leaven a film that takes an unsparing look at the nightmarish side the American dream.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

EAT THE RICH

THE MENU

Starring Ralph Fiennes, Anya Taylor-Joy and Nicholas Hoult
Directed by Mark Mylod
Written by Seth Reiss and Will Tracy
Searchlight Pictures

"Do not eat," says legendary chef Julian Slowik (Ralph Fiennes) to a select group of guests about to partake in his gastronomic delights. "Taste. Savour. Relish." That's how *The Menu* is best enjoyed as well. Though it doesn't offer a lot to chew on, it's a combination foodie satire/bloody thriller chock full of delicious, delectable moments.

Chef Slowik hosts \$1250-a-person, four-and-a-half-hour multi-course dinners on Hawthorne Island. Among those partaking in *The Menu* are Tyler (Nicholas Hoult), who worships Slowik while condescending and mansplaining to his date, Margot (Anya Taylor-Joy), who's a lot more dubious about the elitist eatery she's been brought to. As well she should be, since the courses and their presentation become more sinister as the night goes on, increasingly unnerving the guests, who also include a washed-up actor (John Leguizamo), a gang of obnoxious financial-sector bros (Arturo Castro, Rob Yang, and Mark St. Cyr), and the inevitable pretentious food critic (Janet McTeer). Most of the characters are varying levels of horrible, so there isn't a great amount of suspense regarding their fates, but that's not really what the filmmakers are after. They're out



to skewer and roast a culinary culture devoted to everything but satisfying one's hunger (among Chef Slowik's offerings is a bread plate that's breadless to make a statement) while shocking us with side orders of gore, and they do it with glee and gusto.

The Menu provides its ensemble cast with well-drawn characters and generous portions of tasty dialogue. The main course is the pas de deux between Fiennes and Taylor-Joy: Chef Slowik knows more about Margot than she's aware, she sees more about him than he expects, and their scenes together are a real treat.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

A CAN OF SQUIRMS

ALL JACKED UP AND FULL OF WORMS

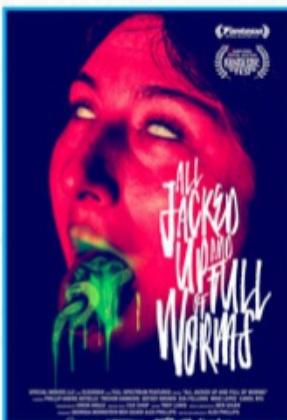
Starring Phillip Andre Botello and Trevor Dawkins
Written and Directed by Alex Phillips
Reel Suspects/Special Movies/Full Spectrum Features

All Jacked Up and Full of Worms wants desperately to be the bastard love child of William S. Burroughs and Frank Henenlotter, and while it comes gloriously, deliriously close at times, it never quite finds a coherent footing... or should that be, it never finds that perfect slithering?

Filmed in Chicago on a budget equivalent to the cost of five used paperbacks of *Naked Lunch*, the story follows Roscoe (Phillip Andre Botello), janitor and handyman at the Rainbow Motel, who meets up with Benny Boom (Trevor Daw-

kins), a ginger-haired naif who's been in and out of "wards" and who has adopted a "Junior Series" sex doll that he dreams of transforming into a real baby. After visiting a sex worker (Eva Fellows), Benny discovers – and soon shares with Roscoe – the joys of consuming

psychotropic worms. As Benny and Roscoe become more addicted to the worms, they cross paths with increasingly dangerous junkies who share their addiction. Their downward slide is punctuated with some visually arresting scenes of their highs, many of which – of course! – cen-



tre around worm/phallic imagery.

The actors are all game for the material (one can only image how many gummy worms they consumed throughout), with Dawkins especially good as the strangely sweet Benny. Besides lots of slime and (not too convincing) puppeteered giant worms, *All Jacked Up* also contains a fair amount of gore, some of which is genuinely disturbing even if the shots of Roscoe projectile-spewing vomit become tiresome. The urban locations serve the film well, grounding it in whatever reality it possesses.

Phillips is obviously a filmmaker worth watching, even if this – his first feature – occasionally tries too hard to be strange. This kind of strange has to come naturally; despite all the good trips, *All Jacked Up and Full of Worms* still feels forced. Try it out on something psychedelic, and possibly slimy.

LISA MORTON

A DREAM WITHIN A DREAM

SOMETHING IN THE DIRT

Starring Aaron Moorhead and Justin Benson
Directed by Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead
Written by Justin Benson
XYZ Films

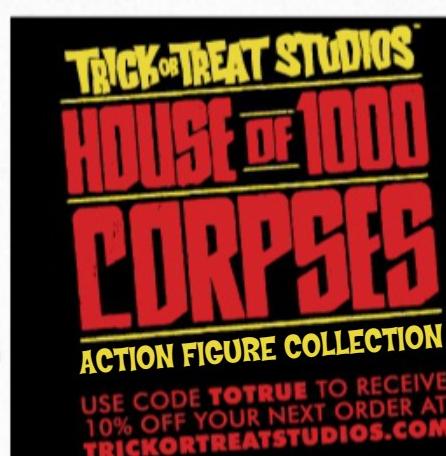
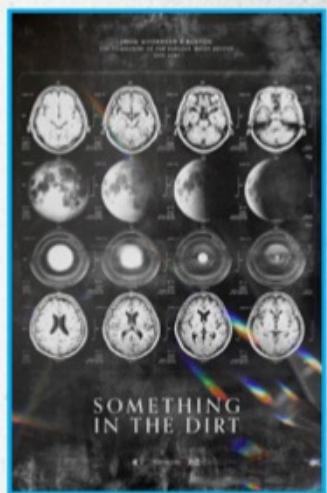
For a brain-teasing good time, you can always count on the filmmaking duo of Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead. Their fifth feature *Something in the Dirt* makes for an intriguing companion piece with their previous *The Endless*, though the two films are unconnected plot-wise. They

starred in the latter as brothers revisiting a scene of childhood trauma that plunges them into increasing oddness; here, they play strangers at the start who become bonded by their fixation on unexplained phenomena.

Levi (Benson) is a newcomer to a rundown Los Angeles apartment building where John (Moorhead) has been a long-time resident. As smoky wildfires blaze in the distance, seeming to portend terrible things, they begin to investigate small weirdnesses occurring in Levi's pad. These include mathematical symbols scrawled on a doorframe that help lead them down a rabbit hole of odd theorizing and obsession, which becomes both eerie and fun to watch. As they attempt to capture paranormal phenomena on video – motivated as much by potential financial gain as by honest curiosity – John calls out, "If you're a ghost, do something." A moment later: "Different. Do something different." But as their focus goes beyond what's happening to what it all means, the duo feed off each other's fascination on a path that could lead to madness.

Something in the Dirt is a mock-documentary wrapped in a meta-mock-doc about that mock-doc inside a narrative feature, peppered with stock footage and talking heads discussing the

Something In the Dirt





OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE GETS SCARED

KILLING CLOWNS



BIG TOP EVIL

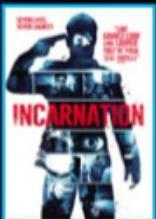
Gravitas Ventures

This issue I am going to venture into the stuff that scares me most, namely, the execrable pile of cinematic dung that lies stinking on my desk (actually, a cardboard box). Thankfully, I am also scared of other things, like sock puppets and... clowns. So it was with some trepidation that I threw on this film about a group of kids on a road trip who get targeted by a crew of cannibalistic clowns. Sure, the makers of *Big Top Evil* have apparently watched *The Devil's Rejects* on repeat, and their cadre of clowns was made up of leftovers from the Halloween store but – that aside – I was gleefully surprised! The appearance of the venerable Bill Moseley as the clown leader (Mr. Kharver, get it?) really clinched this for me, as he commands his minions to kill in a beauteous bloodbath of red-nosed, smiley-faced grease-paint and gore!

BODY COUNT: 22

BEST DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you see a clown

KILL AND KILL AGAIN



INCARNATION

MVD Visual

I've been plagued with nightmares ever since I was a kid and what scares me most is when I think I've woken up from one only to find out that... I'm still in it. That's exactly what happens to the main character in this Serbian offering: he keeps waking up on a bench in downtown Belgrade only to find himself hunted down and murdered by masked men. Now I know what you're thinking: I've seen this movie before when it was called *Timecrimes* or *Edge of Tomorrow* but Andrea won't let me touch those movies! *Incarnation* never gets boring or too familiar and director Filip Kovacevic will keep you guessing the final outcome right up to the end credits. I just hope I'm actually awake right now so I don't have to write this review all over again, goddammit.

BODY COUNT: 17

BEST DRINKING GAME: A shot every time someone wakes up

LOVE IS BEAUTIFUL



LARVA MENTAL

Tetro Films

I've reviewed some brutal movies in my time – brutally made movies, brutally acted movies – but this has got to be the most brutal movie I've seen or reviewed, ever! *Larva Mental* deals with a troubled couple who take psychosis and self-mutilation to a disturbing extreme by slicing and stabbing themselves with knives and scissors. There's a delightful scene where they penetrate each other's asses with a crucifix while shitting themselves in the bathtub. Indeed, I sat through that scene eyes open so I could write it out for your edification. Enjoy.

BODY COUNT: 2

BEST DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you see a penis

LAST CHANCE LANCE

situation, and offering many-layered cinematic onions to unpeel. Here, Benson and Moorhead have created the ultimate pandemic genre production, making the most of very limited resources (two guys and an apartment) while expressing the way minds in isolation can compensate for a lack of external stimuli with ever-stranger preoccupations. *Something* welcomes any and all viewers to the duo's mind game, and the rewards are many.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

NOSEDIVE

HEX

Starring Kayla Adams and Matthew Holcomb
Directed by Chris Johnston and Andy Malchiodi
Written by Hans Rodionoff
Lionsgate



When did the skies around Southern California become the new cinematic haunted house? First Jordan Peele put aliens above Agua Dulce in *Nope*, and now *Hex* gives us skydivers whose group formation unleashes occult forces over Lake Elsinore.

The similarities end there, though. *Hex* is about Sarah (Kayla Adams), a skilled jumper who gets involved with Payson (Matthew Holcomb) and his team when she returns home to Lake Elsinore after a few years away. Payson is anxious to try the Hex, a mid-jump formation requiring six skydivers that's legendarily difficult to execute. When the team finally nails the Hex, the chutes hit the fan: team members start dying, leaving Sarah to discover some terrible truths about her long-dead father and the history of the Hex.

Hex succeeds whenever it takes to the skies – the skydiving scenes are undeniably thrilling, and beautifully shot and edited. Unfortunately, when *Hex* lands it becomes plodding, with far less exciting action and by-the-numbers scares. The explanations, when they arrive, are unsatisfying and confusing; the blasé reactions of characters to traumatic events are sometimes even snicker-inducing. *Hex* tries to rely on its attractive young cast to carry its thin plot, but the bickering twentysomethings will probably just grate on most viewers.

Anyone looking for something supernaturally fresh here – or a nice special effect or two – will be especially disappointed. Even the splatter is light, with only a few scenes of mild bloodshed. Given the body-shredding potential for disasters involving planes and skydiving, the film's avoidance of more horrific gore will likely leave audiences perplexed.

The skydiving theme is certainly unique in the horror genre, but *Hex* does little to make a compelling case for it.

LISA MORTON

JED MEAT

FEED ME

Starring Christopher Mulvin, Neal Ward and Hannah Al Rashid
Written and directed by Adam Leader and Richard Oakes
XYZ Films

What's the best way to die when you really think you want to? The directors of the unsettling possession horror film *Hosts* (2020), Adam Leader and Richard Oakes, nibble on this idea in their new cannibal horror film *Feed Me*.

The strangely comedic and appropriately gory slasher looks at the strange pseudo-friendship that develops between cannibal Lionel Flack (Neal Ward) and a desperate-to-die (and possibly delicious?) widower Jed Freeman (Christopher Mulvin). What starts as a mutually agreed-upon decision for Jed to be slowly devoured by Lionel steadily dissolves into chaos once Jed realizes what he's gotten himself into.

Despite the shocking subject matter, *Feed Me* seeks to lighten the mood with some genuinely funny moments, owing solely to scene-stealer Ward's over-the-top country drawl and facial expressions. As his counterpart, Mulvin does a passable

job as the grieving, suicidal Jed, who brings heart-wrenching gravity to the situation even as he begs Lionel to drill through his arm faster and tear it from the shoulder socket. For all its gore and practical effects, the oddly endearing moments of friendship between the leads keep the story going, but the change of pace is occasionally a bit jarring. Case in point: a musical montage of Lionel trying on his best outfits so that his human dish can help him dress for a date.

In spite of all this, *Feed Me* is ambitious in the lengths it goes to for a laugh, while still taking the time to linger uncomfortably on scenes that display Lionel's truly demented nature. At its core, it's a story about grief and the weird places you can find yourself if you let that grief consume you. A delectable, if disgusting, dish.

SHERON PARRIS



Feed Me

RHOADES OFT TRAVELED

HOW I GOT HERE

Starring Dylan Hughes, Spencer Madison and Jace Carson
Directed by Eric Zanni
Written by Dylan Hughes (Independent)

Plenty of great filmmakers made cheap zombie (or undead-related) movies near the start of their careers. Think George A. Romero (*Night of the Living Dead*), Sam Raimi (*The Evil Dead*) and Peter Jackson (*Dead Alive*); they weren't hampered by low budgets because they had ingenuity, great scripts, and dedicated casts and crews. Unfortunately, filmmaker Eric Zanni has some work to do before he's mentioned in the same breath, as his zombie action movie *How I Got Here* is D.O.A.

Writer Dylan Hughes plays Jarrod, a veteran of Afghanistan leading a group of other pretty young people in their quest for survival in the aftermath of – yawn – a zombie apocalypse. Jarrod has a vague and pretty implausible plan to lead them to military base Fort Benning where survivors are



being taken in. Standing in his way is the group's other natural leader Nic (Spencer Madison) whose humanity has already pretty much left her just four months into this unexplained world takeover by the 'creeps.' There's also the threat posed by another group of survivors led by the psychopathic Rhoades (Jeff Grennell).

Zanni's debut is hampered by several factors: audience burnout, for one. I mean, who really needs a zombie movie in 2022 that doesn't change the game the way *The Sadness* or eleven seasons of *The Walking Dead* did? Then there's just the technical incompetence of having almost every indoor scene so badly lit that nothing is visible. Add to that a group of mediocre actors performing from a cliché-ridden script, and you'll find yourself rooting for the creeps. Oh, and don't you dare name your villain Rhoades as an 'homage' to Joseph Pilato's brilliant asshole villain in *Day of the Dead* unless he's going to be at least equally deranged!

Apparently anyone can make a zombie movie these days, but that doesn't mean they should.

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BITE-SIZED FRIGHTS FOR SMALL APPETITES

ON THE SLAB: LITTLE WITCHES

ARCANA

10:04 mins/YouTube via the Alter channel

There's something delightfully vile about Jerónimo Rocha's short film about a wretched hag putting together a horrific concoction to escape a dungeon. It's a one-woman show as Íris Cayatte plays a witch who gnaws on bugs, eviscerates rodents, and vomits up bile-soaked runes to prepare her infernal spell. But as awful as the visuals are, it's the squishy, nauseating sound design that takes the sequence to transcendent levels of gross. The funny thing is that for all this witch's evil, you'll likely find yourself rooting for her by the end of the film based solely on her commitment to the craft. She's unapologetically horrible, and you've got to respect that. Just be sure to watch this one on an empty stomach.

THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

8:53 mins/YouTube via Merlin Camozzi's channel

The coven of witches featured in Merlin Camozzi's short isn't likely to be found wearing pointy hats and stirring a cauldron. It's more of a gang that plies its trade by mystically hustling saps and taking what it wants through supernatural means. But as a prospective recruit to the coven learns, initiation into the gang is no easy feat - she's put through the physical and emotional wringer to see if she's got what it takes to roll with these ghouls. As the would-be witch, Sarah Lyddan quickly gets you into her corner as she weathers severe torment for a chance to prove herself. We all want to find our tribe, so to speak, and this film taps into that desire in some very interesting ways.



BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

ALIENS VS KIDS ON BIKES

SLASH/BACK

Starring Tasiana Shirley, Nalajoss Ellsworth and Alexis Wolfe

Directed by Nyla Innuksuk

Written by Nyla Innuksuk and Ryan Cavan

RLJE Films/Shudder

Its roots reach back decades, but the beloved "kids on bikes" subgenre has seen a resurgence in recent years thanks in no small part to the Netflix smash *Stranger Things*. In her debut feature *Slash/Back*, director/co-writer Nyla Innuksuk sets that trope in her home territory of Nunavut and delivers a tale that is both familiar and refreshingly new.



The teenaged girls of Pangnirtung have their share of worries that all teenagers contend with, like who is crushing on whom and how much data they have left on their phones. There are also ample problems that are more specific to their tiny hamlet, located on the edge of the Arctic Circle, from the rampant alcoholism amongst the town's adults to the poverty and lack of opportunities that affect them all. As if all this wasn't enough, they also have big horror movie problems, like having to fend off an alien invasion. But have no fear, because "no one fucks with the girls from Pang."

As a filmmaker, Innuksuk plainly wears her love for horror and her influences on her sleeve. *Slash/Back* is imbued with DNA from John Carpenter's *The Thing*, whether its plot is recounted by Jesse (Alexis Wolfe) to scare her friends or when the aliens take over the bodies of Pang's townsfolk (to, it should be noted, amusingly terrible results). Innuksuk also wears her politics on her sleeve, but in a way that's never pedantic or overbearing: she's simply telling the stories of a vastly under-seen and under-represented community.

The inexperienced cast – all Nunavut natives – will manage to charm you even if their delivery isn't always convincing. Likewise for the occasionally dodgy CGI resulting from the film's low budget. While it wasn't necessarily made expressly for them, *Slash/Back* is a terrific movie for the young horror fan and one which proves that "kids on bikes" endures for good reason.

STACIE PONDER

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A NEW SPANISH PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER FROM DIRECTOR ÓSCAR MARTÍN SEES JAVIER BOTET PLAYING AGAINST TYPE IN A DARKLY DRAMATIC ROLE

FRENEMIES TO THE END

BY ROCCO T. THOMPSON

"I'M A COMPLETE CINEPHAGUS," SAYS ÓSCAR MARTÍN, CHEWING OVER HIS PET TERM TO DESCRIBE HIS UNSLAKABLE FILMIC APPETITE. "I'm like a cannibalistic movie watcher...[I] can watch three movies each day."

Speaking from his home in Madrid, Spain, the director is visibly excited that his first feature, *Amigo* (2019), will finally be seen by a wider audience after getting off to a rocky pandemic-time start followed by a successful Fantastic Fest premiere.

Amigo follows Javi (Javier Botet) who, after being disabled in the accident that also killed his wife, is taken in by his long-time friend David (David Pareja) at a remote cottage nestled in the Spanish countryside. But this kind gesture isn't born purely of warm-hearted friendship – Javi doesn't appear to want or appreciate the help. Further, David is haunted by his role in Javi's wife's death and is running low on antipsychotic meds, sending the pair on a downward spiral into paranoid delusion as the weight of the friends' shared traumatic history threatens to bury them both alive.

Having worked for two decades in advertising, music videos, and shorts, Martín, along with his producing partner Elena Muñoz, decided to make the jump to feature filmmaking with *Amigo*. Shot in a single week in an isolated home outside of Madrid with a small, close-knit cast and crew, the film turned out to be, fittingly, a project that relied upon on the many relationships Martín had forged over the years.

"We have effects [by] David Martí and Montse Ribé; they won an Academy Award for *Pan's Labyrinth*, [and worked with] very little budget because we are friends," he says. "Even the main actors – Javier and David – have been friends for a long time."

Botet is well-known to American audiences, though most would never recognize his face; with turns such as the "Crooked Man" in *The Conjuring 2* (2016), various beasties in *[REC]* and *Mama*, and a trio of female spectres in *Crimson Peak* (2015), the performer has enough iconic and unforgettable monsters on his resume

to rival Lugosi and Karloff or his late countryman Paul Naschy. *Amigo* is obviously something of a departure for Botet, who was born with a genetic disorder known as Marfan Syndrome that makes his limbs especially flexible and longer than average.

"He's a very famous actor for playing monsters," says Martín, "[but] it's more frightening to me when he plays a human character – he has a very deep soul."

Botet and his co-star Pareja – who served as co-writers with Martín and got their start together making "strange" and "sick" comedy shorts – drew from this real-life relationship as combative besties for *Amigo*, where old grudges inflict new wounds on an already strained friendship. Indeed, the power dynamics between the two are front and centre in *Amigo*'s engrossing dread and dark comedic aspects.

"They have this kind of obsessive friendship," says Martín. "They were always arguing with each other [on set], but you can feel they are very connected."

Compelled by his fraternal feelings for Botet and the rest of his small crew, Martín affirms that the tight-knit cast, who even slept together in the house where the film was shot, is where *Amigo* found its warm, beating heart.

"We are a kind of a family – at the end of the [filming] we hate each other," he says with a laugh. "They want to kill me, too many hours working, but at the end we are not friends, we're family. [That's] the point of this entire adventure to me."





Slayers

ZILLENNIALS GET REKT

SLAYERS

Starring Thomas Jane, Kara Hayward

and Jack Donnelly

Directed by K. Asher Levin

Written by K. Asher Levin and Zack Imbrogno

The Avenue Entertainment

As 2022 declares a brief moratorium on zombie culture, filmgoers can sense the blood-tinged saliva dripping from the fangs of directors poised to thrust vampires back into the horror limelight (moonlight?). As studios are marching out their current crop of bloodsuckers, here's hoping that *Slayers* isn't the most conspicuous of the bunch.

The Stream Team, a collective of social media somebodies, are beckoned to the affluent Rektor estate under the guise of philanthropical work

that will benefit humanity as much as their bank accounts and online clout. Along the way, they encounter a foreboding Eliot Jones (Thomas Jane, *The Mist*) who warns the gang not to proceed – but if they didn't, what kind of movie would we have?

Probably one that's far more enjoyable than what we're given. *Slayers* loses its way by following through the heavily trampled landscape of similar films that are aimed at one



segment of fandom while also trying to appeal to those outliers who won't give the film a second thought. In glomming on to an exterior of graphic cut-ins and overlays intended to appeal to Gen Z, the result is a misguided visual mess. Equally as offensive is the soundtrack, where rave electro-riffs intermingle with thrash metal and even country western, leaving ears bleeding.

Jane's involvement is a fun experiment; his role as a former video journalist who has transformed into a grizzled Van Helsing with a stripe of nutjob conspiracy theorist brings along genuine humour. His arc, fuelled by revenge for his daughter's murder, is strong enough to stand as a capable counterpoint to the Rektors' plans for world domination. Unfortunately, the whole affair is overshadowed by the inclusion of the Stream Team, who feel like that annoying supporting character in your favourite horror flick, only expanded into a group that isn't fed through the murder machine fast enough.

KEVIN HOOVER

THIS DUCK'S ON A RAMPAGE

WRECK

Starring Oscar Kennedy, Thaddeus Graham

and Alice Nokes

Directed by Chris Baugh

Written and Created by Ryan J. Brown

BBC Three

Blending horror, comedy, and just a dash of *Riverdale*-esque teenage drama, *Wreck* is the

latest horror series to have a bit of fun toying with its viewers. Set on a massive cruise ship, the series kicks off with a dramatic kill within mere minutes in the first episode. The score and acting create a tense atmosphere akin to any classic slasher set-up, but that earnestness is hilariously undercut when the rampaging killer is shown to be in a duck costume. Specifically, a duck in a yellow slicker.

That interplay between blood and laughs, ridiculousness and mortality, is interwoven throughout the episodes in a keen and confident manner. While main lad Jamie (Oscar Kennedy) is clearly heartbroken and desperate to find his missing sister somewhere on that cursed ship, *Wreck* has a little fun at his expense as he lives in the bowels of an ocean liner, working for low wages with a bunch of fellow horny teens.

Wreck showcases its knowledge of horror history with Easter eggs and hat-tips to the ghosts of horror past whenever it gets the chance; the first two episodes alone nod to *The Exorcist*, *Alice*, *Sweet Alice*, *The Shining*, and zombie godfather George A. Romero. But amid all the in-jokes and winks at the audience, it pulls together a fairly compelling and deadly mystery. Many of the characters are saved from being caricatures by showing vulnerability which makes their search for the killer feel wholesomely worthwhile. The kills might be telegraphed, but true to slasher form, that foreshadowing doesn't make it any less fun to behold.



That each episode in the season is produced and directed by Chris Baugh (*Boys from County Hell*) and written by show creator Ryan J. Brown lends the series a sense of cohesion that goes a long way in maintaining the balance between absurdity, homage, and a growing body count, making *Wreck* a cruise worth binging.

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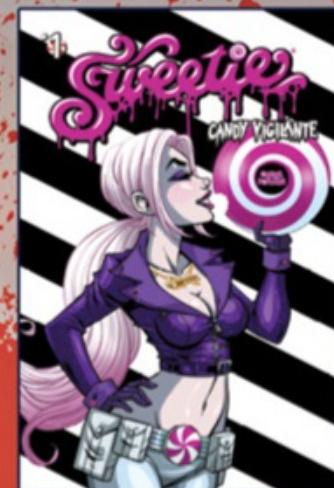
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REISSUED & REANIMATED

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD



RADIANCE FILMS

There's a new light on the Blu-ray reissue/restore scene, with a mission to shine into the odder, darker corners of cinematic history. Next year will see the debut releases from *Radiance Films*, a UK-based outfit founded by Francesco Simeoni, a twelve-year veteran of landmark disc company Arrow Films.

Last fall, Radiance and Simeoni announced their opening salvo of titles, with a heavy emphasis on films examining the darker side of human nature, from George Armitage's *Miami Blues* to Todd Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. The scary side is represented by Amy Seimetz's *She Dies Tomorrow* (2020), an exercise in psychological unease in which impending death is contagious, and Jean-Denis Bonan's *A Woman Kills* (1968), a serial-killer saga that has drawn comparison to the early works of Roman Polanski. Like all of Radiance's output, these two Blu-rays will be well-stocked with bonus

features, including audio commentaries by film critics/historians, interviews, analytical featurettes, booklets containing new writing on the movies and more. These limited editions (2000 copies, in the cases of *Dies* and *Kills*) will be followed by standard versions without the booklets.

Simeoni had been thinking about launching a new label for a while, "as many films I was passionate about did not feel right for Arrow, so I didn't always have an outlet for them. Radiance became a reality during the pandemic, when I had more time to think and figure out how it could happen."

"Blu-ray labels are increasingly focusing on high-profile titles, because they need better-known IP [intellectual property] to warrant



their big overheads," he continues. "That means that small, obscure, or niche titles are going to become increasingly difficult to find, because the volume just isn't there. That's very upsetting to me, because I love these kinds of films. Some of my favourites are discoveries I made on DVD some twenty years ago, but I feel like I'm making a lot fewer discoveries on Blu-ray now."

Simeoni is bringing his decade-plus of Arrow experience to tracking down movies, the acquisition, packaging and marketing processes, etc. At the same time, he notes, "I'm also going a bit rampant. I have to lead with my heart first, otherwise this will all just quickly become compromised. So I'm looking at movies that don't fit a perfect mould, or might be diffi-



cult to market. If people don't like these films, I'm going to learn that lesson fast, and that's fine; I have other, more commercial films down the pipe. However, I wanted to lead with a set of titles that would really communicate what Radiance is about."

One part of Simeoni's mindset that won't change is an openness to cinema of all types, with no particular genre orientation. When it comes to the scary stuff, Simeoni estimates that about a quarter of Radiance's slate will be horror or horror-adjacent, with some gothic chillers as well as fear fare from Japan, Italy and Spain coming further down the line.

"The mission is to be different, to focus on variety and to unearth things that others wouldn't. I'm looking at quasi-art-house horror and obscure comedies, deranged oddities that defy categorization but are really worth checking out, and films that have fascinating histories and stories."

Working with design agency OC, illustrators Time Tomorrow and Maarko Phntm, and writers David Mackenzie, Craig Keller and Johnny Mains, Simeoni is confident that Radiance is poised to become a significant player on the Blu-ray scene, so equal attention is being paid to packaging – each limited-edition disc will come



Miami Blues

with a removable OBI strip (of the type found on specialist vinyl) featuring marketing info and logos.

Given the number of previously obscure movies that have been unearthed and issued in hi-def over the past decade, one has to wonder how many worthy titles remain that have not yet seen disc release, but Simeoni says that finding films deserving of this treatment has been sur-

prisingly easy.

"When I started Radiance, I made a list and got to about 800. Some of them were subsequently licensed elsewhere, others remain difficult due to music rights and so on, but many of the films have just been waiting, because they're quite niche or remain unknown to a lot of people. But it has been very exciting to find so many movies, as well as enthusiastic producers and licensors."

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IT CAME FROM BOWEN'S BASEMENT



DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

Dark,
No Chaser
by John W. Bowen

"Whatwhatwhat?" the Wretched Reader sputters, "No disembowellings, no T&A, no blood farmers? Is this the right basement?" Well, pardon me all to hell for deviating from the usual delete-bin dive for my last column of the year. Truth is, I'm deathly afraid that *Super Dark Times*, an extraordinary 2017 teen thriller I recently stumbled across (thank you, Shudder) may continue to escape wider notice.

It's December in Kingston, New York, but the town seems to be in a constant state of November – grey skies, brown grass, and bare trees with a 90% chance of malaise. High schoolers Zach (Owen Campbell) and Josh (pre-Ozark Charlie Tahan) have been best friends since childhood. We learn, in the opening minutes, that they're both obsessed with the same girl but it would appear this hasn't caused any major friction between them... so far. They natter, *Stand By Me*-style, about mundanities, but just long enough to keep things rolling toward a shocking and gruesome accident that leaves an unpopular kid dead and our protagonists in a panic to cover up what they believe could be mistaken for a murder. As the town begins to buzz about their now-missing acquaintance, Zach's anxieties spiral out of control while Josh becomes increasingly withdrawn and distant. When another classmate they both dislike is found dead, Zach begins to suspect his lifelong friend may actually be very dangerous – or is that just guilt, panic and growing resentment of a romantic rival talking? Hmmm?

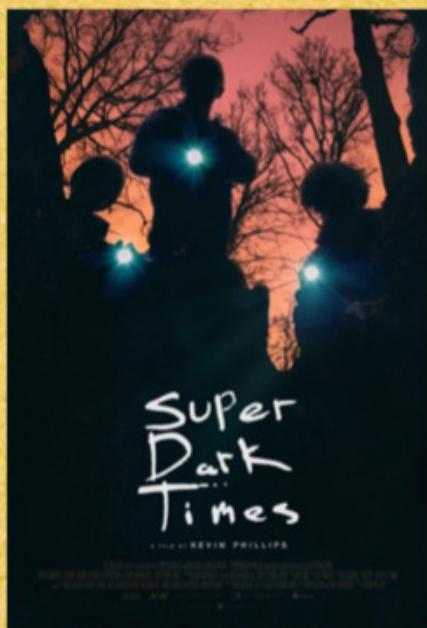
The most common complaint from reviewers seems to be that *SDT* abandons its slow burn to devolve into a slasher film in the final act, but the eventual explosion of chaotic violence seems to me a perfectly organic course of events. Hey, it's called *Super*



Dark Times, not All's Well That Ends Well, right?

Charlie Tahan, currently riding the well-deserved success of Netflix's *Ozark* series, will be the only face familiar to most viewers, but this entire cast is superb. Director Kevin Phillips and writers Ben Collins and Luke Piotrowski had only a handful of obscure short films to their credit prior to *SDT*, although Phillips had worked extensively as a cinematographer in music videos; the writers have since added horror features *Stephanie*, *The Night House* and the new *Hellraiser* remake to their resumes. The (seemingly) easy cohesion of *SDT* seems more like the product of a single vision – it's the kind of film that could have taken a million wrong turns narratively or directorially but the best instincts always seem to have won out.

It's particularly remarkable that two supporting characters – love interest Allison (Elizabeth Cappuccino) and obnoxious, doomed Daryl (Max Talisman) – are as vividly drawn as the leads, although Allison, by design, gets upgraded to co-lead in the final act. She could have been made-to-order junior high wank bait, but Collins and Piotrowski deliver all three dimensions for Cappuccino to in-



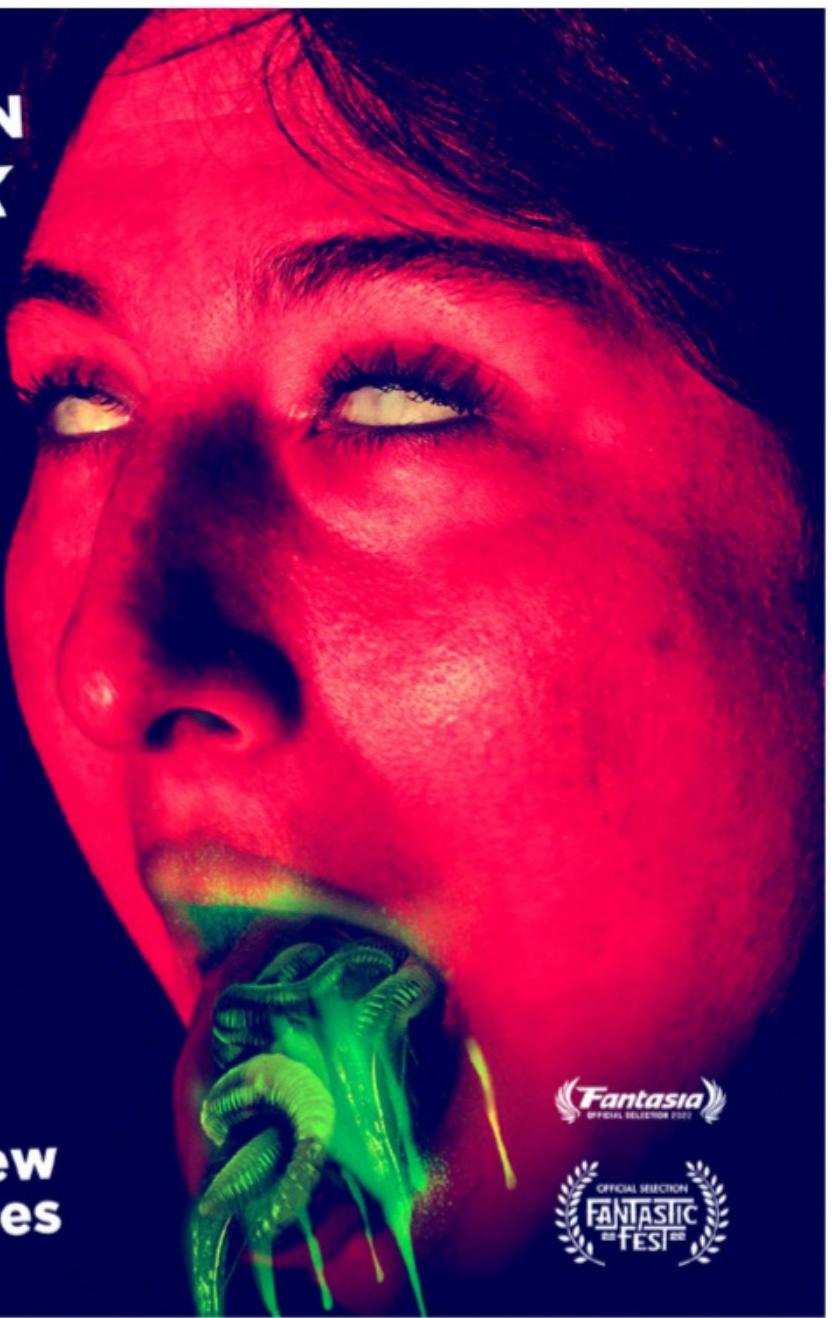
habit, which she does with astonishing ease. Allison is charismatic and stunningly beautiful and her eyes are closed in her yearbook photo. She's not the angelic girl next door, not the slutty bad girl, not the wallflower who blooms in the third act; she won't throw herself at just anyone but doesn't hesitate to make the first move when Zach gets cold feet. She smokes weed and cigarettes, she's kind-hearted and thoughtful, sarcastic as hell and curses like (gasp!) a teenage boy. Talisman's equally vivid Daryl is *that guy* we all knew in school (and many of us still do): overbearing, uncouth, grating, and thoroughly unlikeable in his desperate bids to be loved. I was able to empathize with his obvious loneliness and self-loathing only because I was on the other side of the screen and not stuck with him in Zach and Josh's world.

Even at its best, teenage neo-noir – one of horror's many creepy kissin' cousins – is a difficult sell. Even if you stack the cast with a mix of the latest heartthrobs and established stars (Alpha Male, anyone?) the subject matter lacks broad appeal. Some eventually enjoy a healthy cult following (*Heathers*, *River's Edge*), while others should but don't (Matthew Bright's magnificent *Freeway*, John Fawcett's debut feature *The Boy's Club* or the ingeniously satirical *Brick*). And I'd hate like hell to see this jet-black gem remain unplucked. So get your pluckin' pants on, get the hell out of my basement, and I'll see you next year. ☺

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FILES FROM THE BLACK MUSEUM

THE LONG SHADOWS OF CLASSIC HORROR'S PAST

BY PAUL CORUPE

Thinking Outside Pandora's Box

"THOUGH OFTEN DESCRIBED AS A COMEDY, *CHILDREN SHOULDN'T PLAY WITH DEAD THINGS* IS A LITTLE MORE CLEVER THAN IT GETS CREDIT FOR – AT ITS CORE, IT'S REALLY A SELF-AWARE EXERCISE THAT PLAYS WITH THE LINE BETWEEN ARTIFICE AND REALITY."

There's never been a more exhausting time to be a film fan. Even if you manage to sidestep social media's minefield of film spoilers, instantaneous reactions, and outlandish hot takes, there's still an army of obsessive and aggressive online fandoms to deal with. And they seem louder than ever – from "Snyderverse" stans and Marvel maniacs to die-hard Johnny Depp defenders, social media belligerence seems to be a sought-after edge in

the high-stakes world of studio filmmaking. Sure, it's great for Hollywood players like Zack Snyder, who can use an inflated perception of support to get hired for a redo of *Justice League* (2017), but it's worth remembering that online harassment and negativity can have a life of its own once it's been unleashed. This might be a distinctly modern problem, but it nevertheless recalls a similar lesson from Bob Clark's *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* (1972), an oddball Florida zombie film now available in a brand-new 4K restoration from VCI for its 50th anniversary.

Had social media been around when Clark's film was first released, there probably wouldn't have been many Twitter users dedicated to defending its greatness. *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* is one of those offbeat '70s regional horror efforts that seems like an elaborate put-on even as it delivers a solid dose of late-night chills. In the film, flamboyant theatrical director Alan (Alan Ormsby) heads up a filming expedition to a forgotten island graveyard with intentions of terrorizing his cast and crewmembers. He kicks off the festivities by playing macabre practical jokes, including having actors in zombie makeup chase his frightened friends around the tombstones. But things soon take a dark turn – Alan insists they cart around Orville (Seth Sklarey), a rotting corpse dug up as part of the prank preparations, and convinces the others to help him perform satanic rituals to raise the dead. At first, the spells don't seem to work, but the graveyard is soon bustling with reanimated corpses on the hunt for a late-night snack.

Though often described as a comedy, *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* is a little more clever than it gets credit for – at its core, it's really a self-aware exercise that plays with the line between artifice and reality. From characters that have the same name as the actor portraying them to Alan's grandly theatrical manner and unclear motives, Clark keeps viewers



off-balance about what's meant to be "real" and what's simply a diabolical joke. This becomes clear early on when Alan draws on his directing skills and ability to manipulate his friends to pull off his graveyard prank, only to have those cheap costumed scares quickly forgotten when the long-dead Orville opens his eyes. Suddenly, Alan realizes that his puckish performance has inadvertently kicked off a zombie uprising that poses a very real threat – one that's plainly beyond his control.

Although lumbering zombies only have a passing resemblance to social media mobs, it's hard not to compare Alan's situation to that of Zack Snyder, another director whose flair for the dramatic and desire for control is set to backfire. Back when he was looking to regain control of *Justice League*, Snyder cultivated a vocal and volatile online fandom that he was able to use to negotiate his way back to the director's chair – those who stood in his way would incur harassment from his Twitter army, who routinely inflated their presence by spamming hashtags and bombarding online polls (with some help from a Hollywood PR firm's fake accounts and bots, as alleged by a report this past summer). But even though Snyder has long finished with his director's cut and moved on to new projects at other studios, his aggressive fanbase is still at it, picking fights and targeting perceived enemies in the increasingly unlikely hope that Snyder will return to make more DC Comics movies. Snyder no longer needs their support, but that's of little concern to his online fans, whose continued threats and intimidation must surely have Warner Brothers wondering whether rehiring the director was worth the hassle.

While there's something undeniably heroic in the idea of a lone visionary taking on the studio system, it's worth questioning whether Snyder – a millionaire doing business with other millionaires – saw his social media fandom as anything other than a way to intimidate others. But just as Alan discovers in *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* that pulling a few puppet strings can quickly spiral into a real catastrophe beyond one's control, it's becoming clear that Snyder's reputation will always be associated with his worst online fans, which will only hurt his career in the long run. But perhaps that's as it should be – after all, those who unleash the mindless hordes are bound to get bitten. ☠

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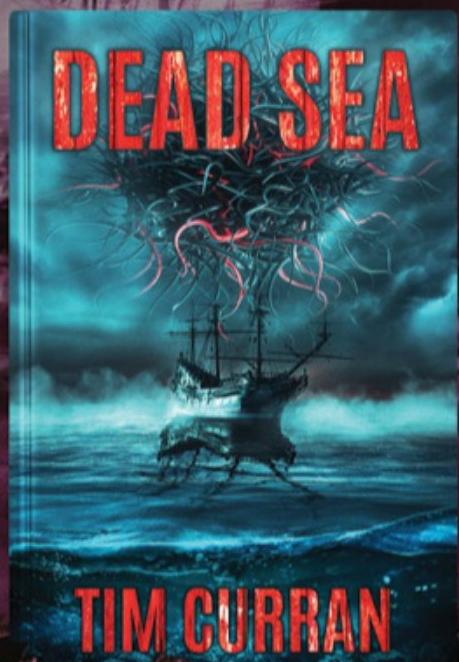
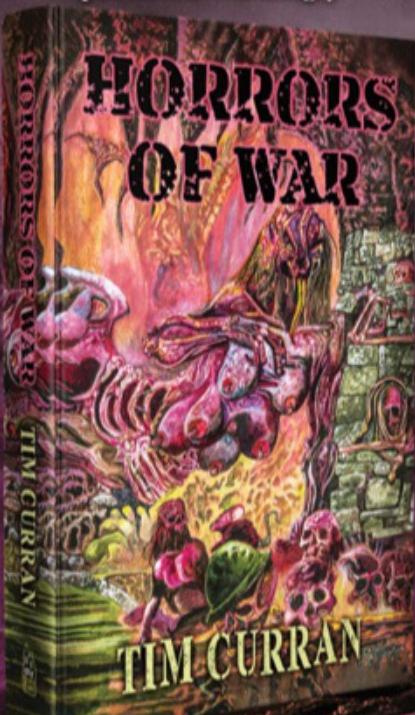
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BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

Cullen Bunn is turning the horror anthology on its head – literally. Presented as a flip comic, *Shock Shop* tells two twisted tales hosted by comic shop proprietor Desdemona Nimue Moreau. On one side we have a doomed little ditty, "Familiars," about a down-trodden divorced man renting a haunted house. Flip the comic over, and encounter "Something in the Woods, In the Dark," irrefutable proof that a camping trip is no way to solve marital woes.

Any which way you choose to start the adventure, Bunn hopes you enjoy his unique take on the popular format. Though probably best known for his long-form, epic horror series such as *Harrow County*, *The Damned* and *The Sixth Gun*, *Shock Shop* stands as a departure that he welcomes.

"I love long, epic stories, and I have a bunch of those I'd love to write," says Bunn. "However, I also love short, self-contained stories. The very best stories, whether they span thousands of pages or only a few, have an ending. With these tales, it elevates the sense of urgency. It creates a ticking clock that we know is counting down as the horror builds. It gives us a heightened sense

of tension and fear."

To maximize that suspense, Bunn is fiddling around with other expectations that come with the format. Unlike most comic anthologies, where each issue presents a handful of self-contained stories, these two tales will be continued across all four issues of *Shock Shop*.

"I wanted them to have a serialized feel," he says. "And since each of the stories is much longer than what you might normally expect to find in a horror anthology, I can take my time with the pacing and I can really dig into the characterization. The stories are shockers, sure, but they're more than that. I want readers to care about these characters, to relate to them, to fear for them."

Fearing for the characters' lives shouldn't be a problem, as each story sets up several potentially gruesome scenarios. In "Familiars," Trevor hopes his new house will help him escape the memories of his failed marriage and rekindle his estranged relationship with his two kids. At first, the magic house appears to be a blessing as it senses Trevor's needs and instantly provides for them, easily making him the Best. Dad. Ever. But the reader can see what he and his kids can't: an assortment of bloodthirsty creatures waiting to pounce. Meanwhile, in "Something in the Woods, In the Dark," Clark and Willa take a camping trip with a group of friends in the hopes of reconciling their broken marriage. As if things weren't tense enough, a monster appears to have targeted the group for its late-night snack.

While both stories seem disparate at first glance, there are several overlapping themes, such as broken families falling victim to outside forces, and the importance of environment when it comes to safety/danger. While this connection wasn't intentional at first, it has allowed Bunn



Shock Shop: Cullen Bunn's new flip comic tells two chilling short tales connected by theme.

another opportunity to tinker with the anthology format.

"It wasn't until the project was greenlit and I was scripting that I realized I had subconsciously delved into some heavier thoughts that worry and scare me," says Bunn. "Once I realized that, of course, I leaned into it. And since I was jumping between the two stories chapter by chapter, I was able to make some subtle connections along the way. I like the result so much that I've decided future *Shock Shop* duos will always have some connective tissue between them, even when the stories are quite different."

FOLLOW PEDRO ON TWITTER @PCABEZUELO



QUICK CUTS

Dr. Amal Robardin. a young Lebanese immigrant living in Brooklyn, is treating her first patient as a therapist. Yasmin is a schizophrenic who claims to be visited nightly by an indescribable yet malevolent presence. When Yasmin suddenly disappears, Amal blames herself and tries to find the young girl, but is soon questioning her own sanity and personal anxieties as she grapples with cosmic forces beyond normal understanding. Tackling heavy issues such as mental illness and diaspora, *Where Black Stars Rise* feels like a very personal work from writer Nadia Shammas yet it touches on feelings that everyone can relate to, from the fear of not living up to family expectations to the existential dread of knowing we are nothing in the grand scheme of things. It's these universal feelings that anchor the work, even when it veers into eldritch territory and the art becomes more and more abstract.



Stop me if you've heard this one: a group of strangers are thrown into a deadly survival game where they need to outwit booby traps and each other in order to avoid grisly death. The tried and very tested scenario is revisited in *Nature's Labyrinth*, a new six-issue miniseries, where eight felons are taken to an island housing a giant, constantly transforming labyrinth, and are told they have 60 hours to escape and claim the prize (character pitfalls



and backstabbing notwithstanding). Given the rash of similar stories, one has to wonder if writer Zac Thompson is either out of ideas or has some sneaky surprises up his sleeve. Given this first issue, I'm willing to bet on the latter. While the concept and characters seem familiar, there are just enough little pieces of information thrown out to make one believe all is not as it appears. Thompson has also injected the right blend of humour, assuring the reader he's aware of the well-trodden formula but he's going to have fun with it anyway.

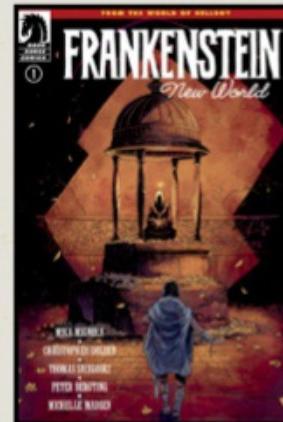
Who is Sweetie, Candy Vigilante? Little is known of this mysterious pale girl, other than her sweet tooth and obvious dislike for those who are naughty. Her target: The Ice Cream Bunny – from all outward appearances,



a family-friendly candy shoppe, but inside lurks a seedy bar filled with scum, villainy, strippers, and a dilapidated Christmas tree. What's a sweet, ice cream-craving girl like Sweetie supposed to do? Why, spiff up the joint with some killer candy powder, toxic bubble gum, and razor-sharp liquorice whips (red, of course). If the first issue tells us little about Sweetie's past or true nature, it at least offers a gory and groovy look into her deadly candy arsenal and fanatical desire to make the world a sweeter place. So who is she, really? No idea, but smile and keep a few extra lollipops handy in case you run into her.

After Ragna Rok devastated the Earth's surface, humanity fled underground, where it survives under the watchful eye of the Oracle, the creature once known as Frankenstein. Years later, young Lilja has visions of a new menace lurking above. Defying the priests and the rest of her community, Lilja is determined to wake the sleeping Oracle from his years-long rest to journey to the surface to see exactly what new horrors await. There's plenty of back story to be found in *Frankenstein: New World*, yet the book works well

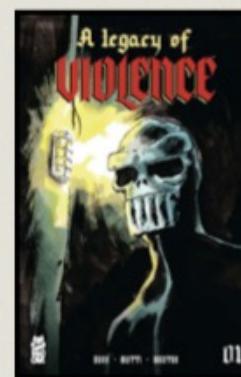
even if you've never read an issue of *Hellboy* or its various spinoffs. Most of this is due to Lilja,



who serves as a strong introduction to her world and Frankenstein's new role. It may seem odd to pair the sombre creature with a precocious little girl who is constantly asking questions and getting into trouble, but Lilja is as much of an outsider as the monster. Treated as an outcast by her peers and adults alike, it's unsurprising that a bond forms between the two, which will undoubtedly prove helpful when confronting the monsters lurking around the corner.

There's a lot going on in the first issue of *A Legacy of Violence*, which makes a straightforward summary somewhat challenging, so let me call out the main points:

one, a skull-masked sadist is torturing bound victims with surgical equipment in a dimly lit room; two, in 1985 Atlanta, a hospital patient with self-inflicted wounds attacks Dr. Nick Shaw, whispering "unit 731" before dying in a bloody seizure; three, Dr. Shaw then travels to Honduras, where a similar incident occurs in a small community hospital; and four, in 1966, a young boy ventures into his grandparents' basement and finds a disturbing film canister labelled "731." How these elements connect remains to be seen, but as Skull Face tells one of his victims, this is "just the opening bell" – one which clangs along with breakneck speed, throwing plenty of action at the reader. That it's all masterly crafted is not surprising given Cullen Bunn and Andrea Mutti's pedigree. Intriguing, disturbing, and ultimately mesmerizing. ☺



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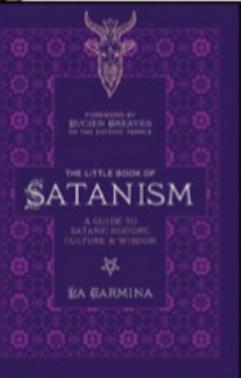
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THE LITTLE BOOK OF SATANISM

La Carmina
Ulysses Press

On the surface, *The Little Book of Satanism* is exactly what it purports to be – an overview of the history of Satan from his pre-Biblical origins through the theatrical non-theism of Anton LaVey's Church of Satan to the socially conscious political activism of The Satanic Temple.



As a primer for those interested in the history of Satan as an archetype, the proliferation of satanic movements, and how Satanism has been used by right-wing fundamentalists as a cudgel to oppress the marginalized, *The Little Book of Satanism* works brilliantly. La Carmina's prose is engaging and informative yet never didactic. At an economical 134 pages, it can be read in a single sitting. For those whose appetites for the diabolical run deeper, an exhaustive bibliography is included.

However, *The Little Book of Satanism*'s limitations lie in its final third, in which it begins to read like a press release for The Satanic Temple. Not so coincidentally, Temple co-founder Lucien Greaves penned the foreword in which he all but declares that *The Little Book of Satanism* will at last define Satanism in terms of what it is rather than what it is not. Yet, the book ultimately goes to great lengths to explain that the altruistic, freedom-defending religious organization is not LaVey's apolitical Church of Satan, a distinction no doubt made to separate itself from the latter's, at times, fascist leanings.

Although *The Little Book of Satanism* touches on LaVey's self-created myth, it does not address the unsavoury side of the Black Pope's life, which included allegations of spousal abuse and animal cruelty. Like LaVey, Greaves has a problematic history tied to the social Darwinist text *Might is Right* (which LaVey himself borrowed heavily from) and has made anti-Semitic statements in the past. Despite The Satanic Temple's righteous work in promoting true religious freedom, bodily autonomy for women, and LGBTQ+ rights, it must confront the

skeletons in its closet to truly make Satanism a legitimate driving force for change in the 21st century. Unfortunately, La Carmina doesn't seize the moment to address these issues.

WILLIAM J. WRIGHT

THE CALIFORNIA GOTHIC IN FICTION AND FILM

Bernice Murphy
Edinburgh University Pres

We're all familiar with the California dream. As The Mamas & the Papas stated in their '60s hit, "I'd be safe and warm, if I was in L.A." – such is the promise of an endless summer oasis. It is easy to understand the allure that has drawn folks to the sandy Californian coast throughout the last century and beyond. What isn't as frequently considered, however, is what happens when that dream becomes a nightmare.

But this is exactly what Bernice Murphy delves into in *The California Gothic in Fiction and Film*. Each chapter explores entries in the Californian horror genre – from 1973's *Messiah of Evil* to 1987's *The Lost Boys* to 2019's *Us* – in great detail, aligning them with historical facts regarding the land on which they take place.

The disastrous wagon train that led to cannibalism by the Donner Party is frequently called upon as a grisly moment in history that serves as a perfect example of the blurred lines between fantasy and reality in California. Sure, it's an alluring oasis that promises a better way of life, which makes it irresistible to many, but oftentimes that promise becomes a fatal craving, as lurking just below the surface is the state's history of genocide and bloodshed. There are, of course, the serial killers and cults for which it's become known, but there's also the poisonous nature of Hollywood itself, especially for young women.

The California Gothic in Fiction and Film is an invigorating read that offers a deep dive into the forgotten, uncomfortable parts of California's history while simultaneously contextualizing its horror staples (including the fiction of Clark Ashton Smith, Shirley Jackson, and Richard Matheson, among others), successfully adding an additional thematic layer to works already loved by the masses. Murphy has managed to not only give these films more depth in her analysis, but

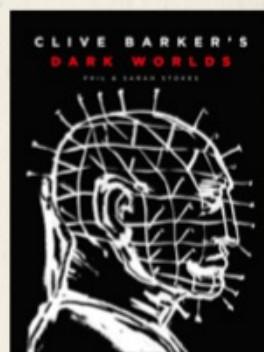
also in turn, more life – which is a lot to be said for a subject plagued by death and degradation under sunny skies.

BREANNA WHIPPLE

CLIVE BARKER'S DARK WORLDS

Phil and Sarah Stokes
Cernunnos

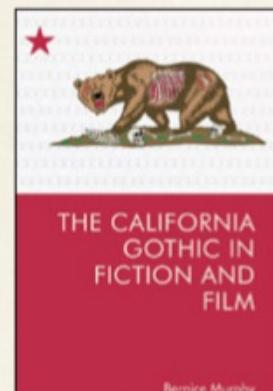
Strange to think that Clive Barker turned 70 last October. Is it possible that the "enfant terrible," the "poster child for the dangerous and depraved," and, of course, per Stephen King's prediction, "the future of horror" could ever become old? To celebrate his venerable age, but also prove his timelessness, Cernunnos has published this huge, luxurious book.



Although best known for his provocative brand of horror from the mid-1980s to early 1990s, Barker's creative imagination was and remains devoted to so much more. As the book's authors remind us, he is "an imaginer, an artist who challenges and provokes us to think in new ways and to appreciate our human condition in new lights, through different eyes." Those provocations are now fully documented in a large-format 350-page volume, from his early avant-garde theatre days (with The Dog Company) and experimental short films (*Salomé* and *The Forbidden*) all the way to *The Scarlet Gospels* and other recent developments. *Dark Worlds* is richly illustrated with photos from Barker's youth, rare behind-the-scenes shots from theatre and film productions, facsimiles of his writings, full-page spreads of his black-and-white and full-colour artworks, photos of comics, video games, toys and, inevitably, stills from films that he directed, or that others adapted from his writings.

While the general approach is laudatory and celebratory, the book doesn't overlook the negative criticism that his works have received, or aspects of his private life, health issues, and other themes that his audience would want to know about. This testament to his life in art is quite exhaustive: a veritable *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Clive Barker...* and never has it been so beautifully and authoritatively arranged in one place. Until now.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ





Clive Barker's *Dark Worlds*.

THE MOUTH IS A COVEN

Liz Worth

Manta Press

Locals may recognize the name Liz Worth from *Treat Me Like Dirt: An Oral History of Punk in Toronto and Beyond*, 1977-1981, which came out back in 2009 from ECW Press. She brings some of this raw punk aesthetic to her vampire novel *The Mouth is a Coven*, which is set in Starling City, a place built on local mythology and generations of urban folklore as its religion.

That's where we meet Blue and where he meets Julie. Both are obsessed with Matter, a powerful vampire said to be older than the city. Blue's been conducting rituals, trying to summon Matter so that he can become a vampire himself, but it's one thing to summon a being with the power of a god and another entirely to think he won't arrive with his own agenda and desires. *The Mouth is a Coven* is a true be-careful-what-you-wish-for parable, in which one can see the tragedy coming a mile away (though not exactly how it will play out).

This fast-paced, accessible read is brimming with short punchy sentences, appropriate amounts of blood lust (and drinking), and a vampire who's as cold and self-interested as one would expect an ancient being to be. Worth occasionally flirts with too much telling, but the narrative never stumbles. Blue's tragic journey is compelling, and so is the idea of folklore and mythology and the abject power of people's belief in stories, which runs through the book from its opening pages to its closing ones.

Rumour has it that vampires are coming back into genre vogue. If true, *The Mouth is a Coven* is a fine way to whet your appetite for a new generation of bloodsuckers..

MONICA S. KUEBLER

CUT TO CARE: A COLLECTION OF LITTLE HURTS

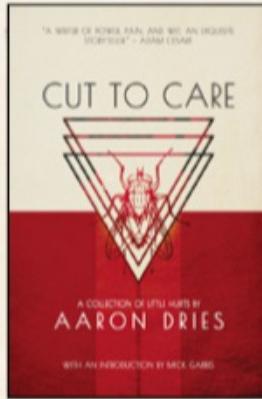
Aaron Dries

IFWG Publishing International

To imbibe Aaron Dries' collection of outstanding nightmares, featuring an intro from genre stalwart Mick Garris, is to inherit an assortment of scars that haunt like ghosts.

Drawing from his background as a youth addiction counsellor, Dries provides a screaming rendition of what's at stake when we let our guard down. As a result, we're driven to dissect each tragic story until we've exposed the fragile humanity struggling to blossom within. In "Tallow-Maker, Tallow Made," for instance, a young woman suffers the sins of her dead father only to manifest something far more sinister by way of her yearning to have him back. So, while some blossoms offer sustenance that fuels our need to care, in the end, we can still find ourselves face to face with the ruins of our best intentions.

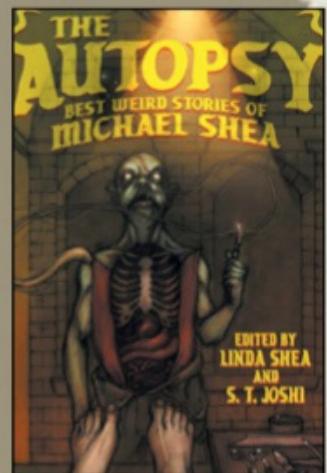
Ever bold and unflinching, in *Cut to Care* Dries grabs us by the heart and hurtles us through a kaleidoscopic landscape of suffering. We're made to toe the line between blind faith and despair in "Shadow Debt"



DANTE'S PICK

THE AUTOPSY: BEST WEIRD STORIES OF MICHAEL SHEA
Linda Shea and S. T. Joshi, eds.
Hippocampus Press

When Guillermo del Toro chose Michael Shea's story "The Autopsy" for his *Cabinet of Curiosities* series, it signalled that the time was nigh for readers to rediscover the late author (deceased in 2014). The titular tale of this new selection (with two previously unpublished titles added) is a classic, often-anthologized story of claustrophobic alien terror, incomparable in the way it merges cosmic and body horror within a small space of a mining town following an apparent underground accident. Delightfully gruesome as it is, it is only one of this volume's stories ripe for cinematic adaptation, as Shea's writing is brimming with memorable images.



For example, there are the hapless astronauts in "Polyphemus," who land on an alien planet's lake, only to discover it is a titan creature's immeasurable eye. Or the insect-like creatures inhabiting human guise, feeding on the solitary passengers in a bus ("The Horror on the #33") or turning winos into wine spiced with their lives' memories ("Water of Life"). Weird body snatching is a common leitmotif: in "Salome" a philandering husband's mind is inexplicably sucked into his wife's cat, while in "Up-scale" a strange femme fatale lures her lovers into fates better left unspoiled. Even the slightly more conventional stories offer fresh and intriguing imagery, such as the sauna-based revenge from beyond the grave in "Ghost," or the surreal hell that criminal protagonists enter when they cross a Native American witch doctor in "Tollbooth."

Lovers of 1980s horror films filled with creatures and transformations will cherish this vintage blend of sci-fi and horror by a writer who deserves to be read – and filmed – more often. They should also try his modern Lovecraftian (posthumous) novel *Mr. Cannyharme* (RM#201) from the same publisher.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIC

WITH HIS ESSAY COLLECTION *WHAT THE DAEMON SAID*, MATT CARDIN EXPLORES THE SHADOWY PLACES WHERE HORROR, RELIGION, AND THE NUMINOUS COLLIDE

Grimscriber Divinations

BY DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

AS AN EDITOR, MATT CARDIN HAS LEFT HIS MARK ON SEVERAL IMPORTANT BOOKS, among them the seminal encyclopedia *Horror Literature Through History* [RM#178]. As practitioner of grim horror tales, his stories were collected in *To Rouse Leviathan* [RM#189]. And now, at last, all of his essays – once scattered through various hard-to-find publications and out-of-print books – have been assembled in a volume titled *What the Daemon Said* (available from Hippocampus Press). At nearly 400 pages, it is a heavy book on heavy subjects: philosophical and religious aspects of horror fiction and cinema, from the quest for enlightenment in *Frankenstein* to George A. Romero's *Dead* films, with a special stress on the cosmic and the mystical.

All these writings are based on the conviction, as Cardin tells us, that "horror stories, especially – but not exclusively – supernatural ones, automatically evoke the same fears, questions, and fascination with the supernatural and the numinous that are the chief themes of religion... Just like religious rites, practices, and disciplines, horror can open the reader up to an encounter with the numinous."

Examining Cardin's body of work, both his fiction and non-fiction, it is obvious that, for him, the very idea and experience of horror foregrounds, highlights, underscores, and calls out the boundary between self and world, self and other.

"Horror is an emotion," he says, "and also a bodily reaction, in which there's the sense of some boundary of wrongness being breached, whether mental, moral, physical, or supernatural. Horror is a sense of mingled fear and revulsion at the encounter with and awareness of something that *should not be*. It pierces your world, your personal cosmos, the usually unconscious and unexamined boundary between your self and the universe of otherness that confronts it. All of this is simultaneously true of religion and spirituality. Religion is the realm of principles and powers that confront the human self with awesome intimations of something beyond, something outside the horizon of the normal human capacity, or maybe even the *intrinsic* human capacity, to know and understand."

Naturally, Cardin's essays are devoted to angels and demons, religion

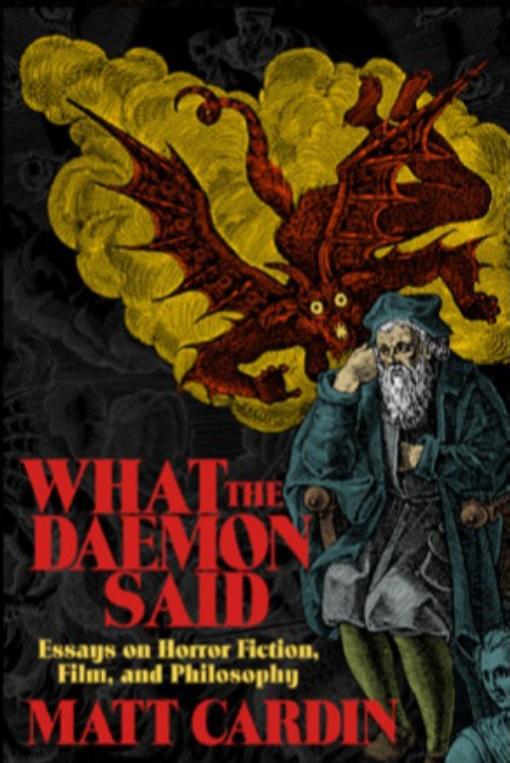
and vampires, gods and monsters, and higher intelligences which inspired people such as Aleister Crowley and Timothy Leary. However, his own very special dark muse is Thomas Ligotti, the arch-priest of pessimistic horror, to whom he devoted six essays in the book covering some general ground, specific topics (e.g. the influence of H.P. Lovecraft), but also analysis of specific stories. Evidently, Ligotti's work resonated more deeply than that of any other fiction writer.

"When I first read Tom's work, starting with his collection *Grimscribe*, it was one of those transformative reading experiences where you realize in real time that you've discovered one of your life's defining authors," Cardin confesses. "Everything about his stories, from their content to their style, felt like it was speaking to me from the depths of my own soul and saying things I had been saying to myself unconsciously for years. At that time, I had already written my first mature horror story, 'Teeth,' three years earlier, and had poured into it a pessimistic and supernaturally nightmarish outlook that I only later discovered was the hallmark of Ligottian fiction."

Still, despite his own dark fictional creations and essayistic explorations, Cardin does not subscribe to the notion that the horror genre is a "Trojan horse" for spreading pessimistic messages.

"I think pessimistic messages can be delivered effectively through all manner of genres," he says, "and anyway, horror fiction can also be an ideal vehicle for spreading ultimately optimistic messages, such as Stephen King's *It*, which, even though it's essentially a Lovecraftian horror story expanded into a gargantuan mega-novel, ends on a decidedly and movingly hopeful note. And this is accentuated by the very fact of the manifold horrors that have preceded such a conclusion. From this, one might just as well argue that horror is an ideal Trojan horse for spreading optimistic messages, because its very darkness offers an opportunity for pulling a reversal and contrasting this with a sudden eruption of light."

After a pause, he adds: "Actually, now that I think about it, I'm inclined to maintain that it's rosy and sunny stories that provide the ideal vehicle for smuggling pessimistic messages into the psyches of unsuspecting audiences." ☠



when a kind old woman becomes hunted for saving a life, all while forced to watch the love of her own life fade away piece by lonely piece. In "Damage Inc.", we experience the slow decay of sympathy through a woman who professionally impersonates the dead for any mourner tortured and wealthy enough to hire her. Meanwhile, the title entry pays homage to a self-made saviour eager to give the literal skin off his back to anyone in need.

Expect to have your heart punched out as awful truths are splayed before your eyes, ripe for critical contemplation. Not for the squeamish nor weak of mind, but then again, as the author's jagged little hurts so eloquently allude, neither is caring.

RICK HIPSON

KRAZYLAND

Mar Romasco-Moore
Delacorte Press

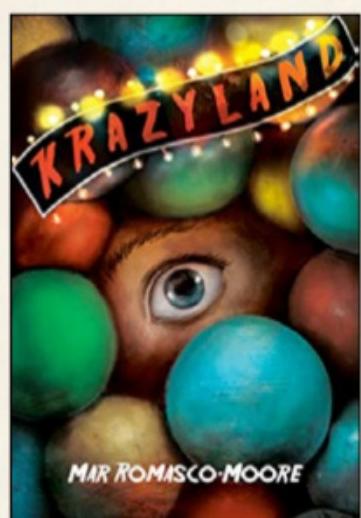
Nathan's uncle purchased Krazyland a couple years back. You'd think he'd be elated at having a kids activity centre, complete with games, an enormous play structure, and three ball pits, in the family, but Nathan is thirteen and would rather not get dragged there for his little cousin's birthday and damn near every other family event.

If only Nathan knew about the interdimensional rift tearing itself open beneath the biggest of the ball pits. No one's noticed that it's been slowly sucking in things from our world for ages, until a kid slips through, and soon it's gobbling up anything and anyone who dares step into the mass of colourful balls. Of course, this isn't a scenario that Uncle Steven is going to understand, real as it may be, but Nathan's not without some help. The former owner's granddaughter still works at Krazyland and knows exactly what's happening: now that a person has entered the nothing space on the other side of the rift, the tear's going to keep on getting bigger and more destructive as long as they are in there.

Cue an urgent rescue mission into the nothing dimension, which has constructed itself as a hallucinatory nightmare version of Krazyland above, replete with giant trampolines, enormous shoe-wearing spiders bent on squashing their human prey, and an arcade game come alive as an endlessly hungry, world-devouring monster. And somewhere down there, amidst all this madness, there's a lost little boy, and who knows who or what else.

Krazyland is a confident middle-grade debut from Mar Romasco-Moore, who delivers on her premise with a wild funhouse ride of a novel that balances scary moments with the sheer ludicrousness of the suddenly sentient items found in the nothing dimension. She earns bonus marks for the cheeky chapter titles and packing in enough thrills to keep my own reluctant young reader turning the pages. Final grade: A.

MONICA S. KUEBLER



LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

R.I.P. 2022

When I was young, someone told me that your forties are tough because that's when your heroes begin to die. Given the titans of horror who have shuffled off this mortal coil in recent years, that anecdote has proven itself true. As we hit middle age, the people whose work we grew up on, whose creations helped shape our own art and interests, are now entering their twilight years and retiring to the great beyond.

On September 4, genre fiction fans found themselves saying goodbye to *Peter Straub*, who died following a long illness. Straub wrote primarily supernatural fiction, and his body of work encompassed seventeen novels, eleven novellas, and five short story collections, as well as poetry and essays. His career had many highlights: his 1979 novel *Ghost Story* was adapted into the 1981 feature film of the same name; 1983's *Floating Dragon*, about a town beset by a centuries-old evil, won the August Derleth Award; 1984's *The Talisman* (co-written with Stephen King) was nominated for awards from both World Fantasy and Locus; and 1988's serial killer novel *Koko* won a World Fantasy Award. In a further impressive feat, each of his seven novels released after 1993 was also nominated for at least one award, with 1993's *The Throat*, 1999's *Mr. X*, 2003's *Lost Boy, Lost Girl*, 2004's *In the Night Room*, and 2010's *A Dark Matter* all taking home Bram Stoker Awards in their respective years. That's a lot of accolades, which are only made more impressive by the number of contemporary horror authors who remembered Straub on social media not just for how his work influenced them but for the advice and assistance he provided early in their careers. R.I.P. to a true champion of the genre.

Other horror lit folks we've lost in 2022 include American writers/poets Corrine De Winter (winner of a 2005 Bram Stoker Award for *The Women at the Funeral*), Billy Ray Wolfenbarger, and Richard L. Tierney (also a Lovecraftian scholar of note); Afrofuturist Valjeanne Jeffers, who dabbled in horror with her short stories and *Immortal* series; American pulp author Ron Goulart; YA author Joseph Delaney, whose 2004 novel *The Spook's Apprentice* was adapted for film as *Seventh Son* (2014); non-fiction authors Dr. Elizabeth Miller (a Canadian *Dracula* expert who wrote *Reflections on Dracula* and *Bram Stoker's Notes for Dracula* among others) and Denis Meikle (*A History of Horrors: The Rise and Fall of the House of Hammer*, *Vincent Price: The Art of Fear*, and *The Ring Companion*); International Horror Guild Award-winning short story scribe Don Tumasonis; and Jon M. Harvey, the editor/publisher behind Spectre Press. R.I.P.

And with that sad bit of reporting, R.I.P. to 2022 as well.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

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CURATED BY PAIGE REYNOLDS

209



THIS MONTH:
THE HANDCRAFTED HORRORS OF GRAYHOUSE STUDIOS

A **RUE MERCILE** COLLECTIBLE



This issue, we bid your eyeballs welcome to Grayhouse Studios, a fear factory of unique, handcrafted silicone and resin props and a house of custom display collectibles! Grotesque zombies, rotting skeletons, and monsters you wouldn't want to meet in your worst nightmares are all here. These gooey, toothy, hairy, ultra-realistic creatures come from the minds (and hands) of Michael Perry and Angela Webber.

NAME

Grayhouse Studios

HOMETOWN

"I'm from a small western Massachusetts town and my wife (and partner) is from Iowa."

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"We primarily work in silicone and resin. Each piece is sculpted, moulded, cast, painted, etc. Everything is hand-built, one at a time, which includes custom painted inlaid eyes and teeth, silicone gums and tongue as well as punched hair. We also add a lot of woodworking to the pieces as well, with our own custom bases and shadow boxes."

DEEDS

"I'm proud to be able to do this for a living and to be able to work alongside my wife."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"Our inspiration comes from the beauty of natural decay in all things."

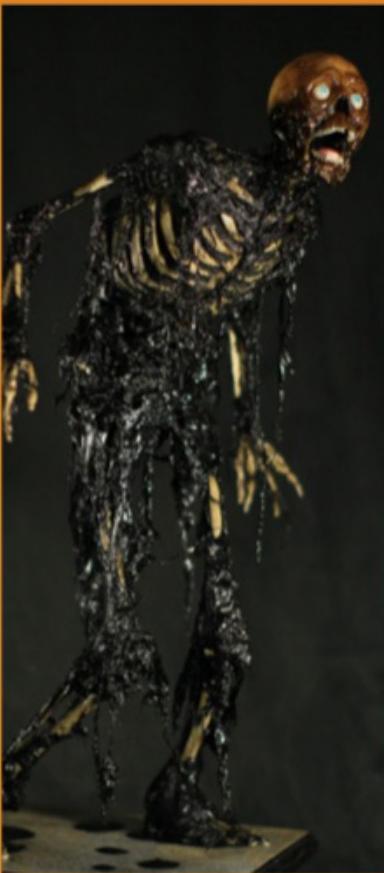
LAST WORDS

"Make sure to enjoy your life, do things you want to do, and work hard for what you care about."

RESTING PLACE

Find Grayhouse on Instagram [@grayhouse_studios](https://www.instagram.com/@grayhouse_studios), and at thegrayhousestudio.com.

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A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

BY
STACIE
PONDER

AFTER MUCH INFERNAL DELIBERATION, I have decided that being a movie Satanist is not for me. Yes, the robes, fancy daggers, and other accoutrements are cool but, to be honest, it seems like a pretty exhausting lifestyle overall. Going to lengths to hide my penchant for evil from normies, having to relearn all the high school Latin I've forgotten... and then there's the chant circles? Attending an endless cavalcade of meetings and rituals and ceremonies? What a commitment!

While the Satanist life depicted in movies is simply too jam-packed and hive-minded for me, I do get a thrill watching their antics unfold like any other black-blooded horror fan. Whether it's a nanny hanging herself (all for Damien, natch) or Minnie Castevet being nosy with her new neighbours, I can never get enough of their schemes. No matter their nefarious methods, for many satanic cults, the goal is clear: getting the Antichrist or spawn of Satan here on Earth to, you know, fuck shit up but good. This is generally achieved through either ritual sacrifice of a virgin or an animal, or a woman voluntarily or involuntarily birthing the evil babe. Sometimes, like Rosemary Woodhouse, she may not know the, uh, future career path of her unborn child. Other women, like Samantha Hughes in *The House of the Devil*, are well aware of who and what she's carrying, and they may take great pains to prevent the birth. The details of these schemes may be varied, but nonetheless they have important commonalities: they are well-organized and lead to a singular, obvious goal.

The details of certain other movie Satanists, however, are the ones inscribed on my heart like a pentagram drawn in the blood of my enemies. Take, for example, those of the 1978 film *Devil Dog: The Hound of Hell*, wherein a group of cultists perform a ritual that leaves a German Shepherd (the

dog, not a Deutsche herdsman) magically impregnated by, one can assume, the Dark One. After her litter arrives, the cultists drive around in a truck dispensing evil puppies and... fruit. When a family adopts one of these hounds of hell, chaos ensues – by which I mean the dogs stare at people and then maybe later those people die, and the family members act all weird and are eventually vaguely in cahoots with Satan himself.

While this obviously fills me to my very brim with delight, I can't help but marvel at how convoluted and ineffective these schemes are when their goals are so opaque. Really, does it even qualify as a "plan?" I can just imagine myself at the movie Satanist meeting, eating one of the donuts that Deborah brought, piping up with the brain wave of getting a dog pregnant by Satan and then giving out the puppies to unsuspecting families. Then someone would ask "To what end?" and I would be forced to shrug my black-robed shoulders. They would then demand I immediately turn in my robe and fancy dagger, and they would be right for it.

By both example and anti-example, movie Satanists teach us exactly the kinds of lessons that life coaches and inspirational speakers have been spouting forever. Most importantly, establish clear goals for yourself! Maybe you want to bring the Antichrist to life so as to earn world domination and wicked powers for you and your cohorts, or maybe you want to organize your messy closet in some macabre minimalist Marie Kondo-goes-to-hell kind of way. No matter! Just put on your robe and create an easy-to-follow, logical path to your goal. The daggers may be fancy, but the execution should be simple. After all, there will be plenty of time to hand out satanic puppies after the Antichrist is here – or your closet is clean, whichever comes first. 🐾

HORROR CULTURE



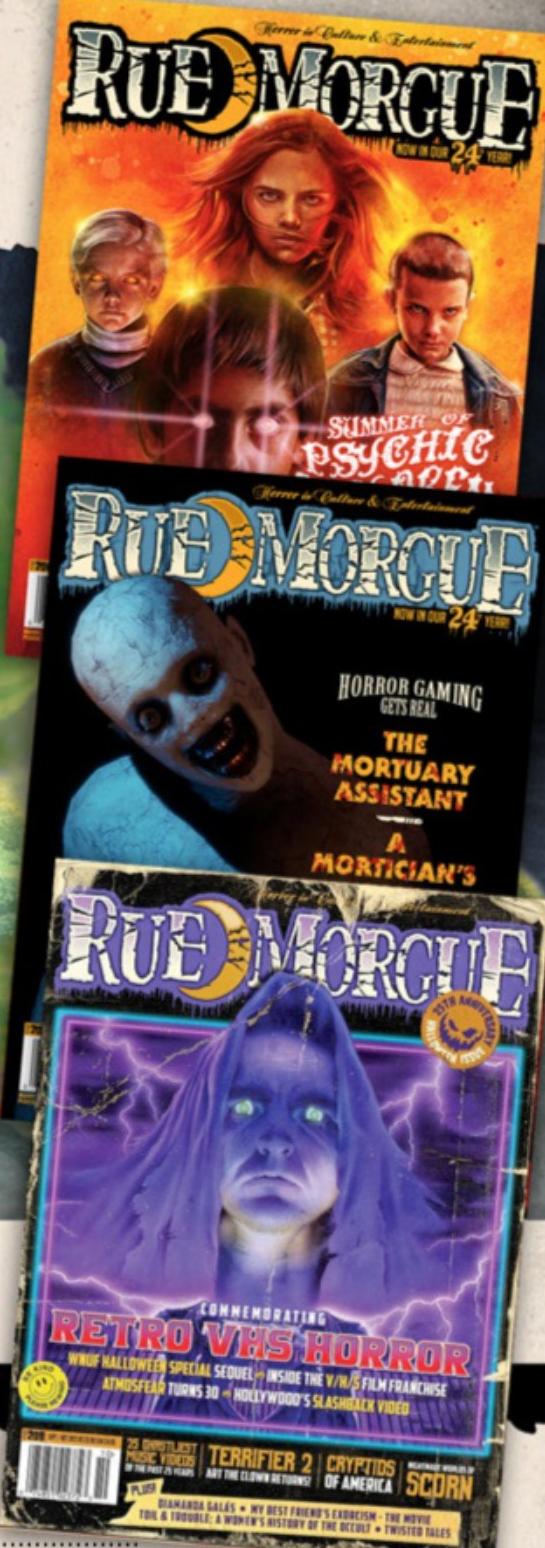
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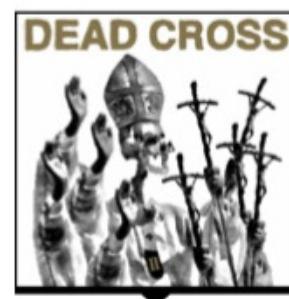
MNTHRН

Veil of Darkness

VAIHE RECORDS

Just when you thought you were safe from another faux horror soundtrack, along comes *Veil of Darkness* from Berlin's MNTHRН, with its sparkling synth sounds and evocative cover art from Fifa Finnsdottir. The brooding, moody main titles are built around a looping bass figure, which kicks into high gear with the more propulsive end titles to round the album out. Sandwiched in between are cues of lo-fi synth underscore, filled with cavernous reverberation that suggests something truly epic in scope. One thing MNTHRН doesn't go faux on are the actual synths – all analog – used to create the imaginary soundtrack, and *Veil* is all the better for it. Conceptually, this isn't anything new (even the descending four-note refrains that ebb in and out feel derivative) and yet the whole endeavour kind of works, mostly because the composers stick to their guns and make this thing sound like it came from the '80s, not just an homage to the era. ☠️☠️☠️½ JS

ELECTRONIC



DEAD CROSS

PUNK

II

IPECAC RECORDINGS

Singer extraordinaire Mike Patton and his Fantomas/Mr. Bungle colleague, legendary drummer Dave Lombardo (Slayer, and many more), have done it again: Dead Cross' sophomore album is a *Scanners*-level mind-blower, one that's even more vicious and diversified than their first. Kudos to Retox guitarist Michael Crain and bassist Justin Pearson (The Locust) for this deliciously textured yet exotic blend of punk stingers and experimental speed metal bangers. Plus, this time, Pearson also sings on two thirds of the songs, adding some depth and despair to the mix. Eric Livingston is back with killer cover art, along with a couple of dread-inducing, teeth-grinding videos, courtesy of Displaced/Replaced (for the animated freak-out "Reign of Error") and Chris Cunningham (the bloody yet smoky ticker-stopper "Heart Reformer"). Dead Cross' II is all about devilish politicians, crawling ants, has-beens, maniacs and, of course, death. Don't sleep on it, life's too short. ☠️☠️☠️ KG



THE 69 EYES

ROCK

Drive

ATOMIC FIRE RECORDS

They're baaaaack! Long-running Finnish goth rock outfit The 69 Eyes return and, after 33 long years, the music just keeps getting better. Here the "Helsinki Vampires," as they are affectionately known, offer three new tracks plus a live version

of "Two Horns Up" from 2019's *West End* album. The vibe is pure '80s, L.A. high-octane rock, very reminiscent of Billy Idol's *Rebel Yell* record but with more power, speed, and production. Lead single "Drive" was released with a typical vampiric music video, and followed by "Call Me Snake." The pulsing rhythm section and electronics on this track are so hair-raising, it's impossible to tell if the song is actually about *Escape From New York*. Overall, the only thing that really qualifies this EP as "goth" is Jyrki 69's trademark spooky Elvis vocals, but it's a kick-ass trio of original songs that would guarantee a kick-ass live show. Sweet. ☠️☠️☠️ AVL



THE DAMNED

PUNK

A Night of a Thousand Vampires

EARMUSIC

Shortly before the onslaught of the global pandemic, London's Palladium theatre hosted a thousand "vampires." Attendees lined the street, most in full Transylvanian regalia, waiting for the arrival of their Dark Lord: Dave Vanian. He did not disappoint, arriving in a horse-drawn hearse, trailed by a macabre procession of circus freaks and ghastly performers. What followed was a musical version of a Hammer film: Vanian's voice sounds enriched by age, transforming from Christopher Lee to Max Schreck throughout the night. Captain Sensible also still shreds at 68. Highlights include a rendition of early favourite "Wait For the Blackout," the multi-instrumental "Grimly Fiendish," and the mothers of all covers, "People Are Strange" and "Bela Lugosi's Dead." The show marked the final performance with drummer Andrew "Pinch" Pinching, who hung

up the sticks after this epic performance. And who can blame him? It's always good to go out on a high note. ☠️☠️☠️ DR



WEDNESDAY 13

SURF

Horrifier

NAPALM RECORDS

That he has consistently released horror-themed music for seventeen years is a rare feat, and with his ninth studio release, Wednesday 13 proves that some things do in fact get better with age. Existing somewhere between raspy horror punk and '80s hair metal, each of the eleven tracks on *Horrifier* offer a distinct sound, from the fist-pumping "Insides Out" to the surprisingly tender rock ballad "The Other Side" – penned about the sudden deaths of both his mother and his Murderdolls bandmate Joey Jordison. Paying homage to the forefathers, "You're So Hideous" and "Good Day to Be a Bad Guy" take on the campy vibes of Alice Cooper. And though "Return to Haddonfield"

THE FURIES

Ken Lampl

SCARE FLAIR RECORDS

Tony D'Aquino's 2019 thriller *The Furies* was buoyed by a badass soundtrack from composer Ken Lampl, making his 85th (!) film score, which has now been minted on vinyl by emerging label Scare Flair. Here, Lampl weaves a surprisingly varied sound palette, with many of the digital sounds created specifically for the film, which makes for a distinctive listen. Lampl often employs string textures on a surprisingly varied assortment of cues, ranging from looping synths on "Village Bells" to stretches of disturbing sonorities that add tension throughout. Still, the score is at its best when playing with big, bold themes, such as the badass five-note motif that opens the album, or the more serene, melancholic moments ("Friends") near the conclusion. Clocking in at 35 minutes (the length of those old Varese Sarabande releases), there's just enough score here to make you want to flip the B side back to the A again after listening. ☠️☠️☠️ JS

SOUNDTRACK

THE FURIES

"DESTINED FOR CULT STATUS. THIS IS A SERIOUSLY EICKING GORY FILM."

STALK AND THRILL KILLS WITH TENSE PSYCHOLOGICAL DRAMA

PODCASTS FROM BEYOND



THE ADVENTURES OF MEMENTO MORI

THEME: Death Studies

FORMAT: Interviews

FREQUENCY: Limited Series

As a rule, horror fans are well acquainted with onscreen death, but how often do we really think deeply about the end of our own lives? In an attempt to come to terms with his own impermanence, humanist chaplain D.S. Moss has been exploring the science, mysticism, and culture of death – and he invites us along on his journey via his podcast, *The Adventures of Memento Mori: A Skeptic's Guide for Learning to Live by Remembering to Die*.

The phrase “memento mori” is Latin for “remember that you must die,” an idea that has existed in many forms in different cultures throughout history. The phrase is said to have originated in Rome, where a slave would accompany the triumphant general during victory parades, consistently whispering “memento mori” in his ear to keep him grounded. Nowadays, the notion shows up frequently in art, often in the form of skulls, bones, hourglasses, clocks, and extinguished candles – anything to remind us that our time will one day run out.

Spanning two seasons and about six years, the podcast leaves no tombstone unturned, covering practical, emotional, and outlandish topics that are in equal parts philosophical, dark, and lighthearted (as much as one can be concerning death). In each 30-minute episode we eavesdrop on Moss as he consults professionals about planning his funeral, what happens to his online persona when he dies, and how to write an obituary. Things get deeper (and darker) with discussions of suicide, the death that is required for our food industry to thrive, and when to make “the call” to put down a beloved pet. Two episodes are even dedicated to musings and wisdom from real people on their deathbeds (keep a tissue box handy for these ones). Other episodes tackle wilder topics such as communicating with the dead, mass extinction, and myths of immortality.

More than a flight of morbid fancy, *The Adventures of Memento Mori* is documentation of Moss’ journey to becoming a humanist chaplain, meaning he can provide ceremonies, spiritual guidance, and care to those in the last moments of their lives, without being affiliated with any particular religion. His commitment to the craft is obvious in his willingness to get his hands dirty, even going so far as being hypnotized into past life regression, attempting to kill his ego in an Ayahuasca ceremony in South America, and attending a death simulation retreat in Hawaii.

Ready to get (sorta) real about death? *The Adventures of Memento Mori* is a great place to start. Moss’ wry sense of humour and genuine interest in life and death is bound to spark a bit of morbid curiosity, even amongst the most puritanical of listeners.

💀💀💀½ JESSICA BUCK

and “Christine: Fury in the Night” fill the horror movie song quota, *Horrifier* is more than just a Halloween party soundtrack. If you only know Wednesday 13 for his early period during your mall goth days, it’s high time to circle back. 💀💀💀JB



COFFIN TORTURE

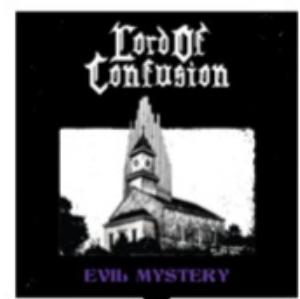
METAL

Blennoid

SLUDGE LORD

It's been a minute since Coffin Torture's excellent *Dismal Planet*, and anyone could forgive the band for having simply dissolved into a pool of its own caustic ooze. Not so! *Blennoid* sees the duo return and take its pitiless sludge metal to an ever more gruesome level. Sonically, the six tracks gush like the sluicing out of sewage pipes that have been clogged for millennia: a slow, lumpy, stinking torrent of the vilest effluent you could possibly encounter. To complement the sucking pit riffs and dry-heaved vocals, the band digs into such cheerful topics as flesh-eating plants, brainworms, and something called a “crawling spleen” which was somehow inspired by a Nickelodeon cartoon. Perhaps most fittingly of all, though, Coffin Torture looked to Stephen King's short story *The Raft* for inspiration – a tale of a vicious, sentient ichor that painfully engulfs any unwary souls unfortunate enough to stray into its path. 💀💀💀½ AD

on *The Thing* and its source material, John W. Campbell Jr.'s excellent *Who Goes There?* For *Ascension Beyond Kokytus*, the band adopts a sludged-out, doom metal approach, dealing mainly in clotted gurgles and forbidding ice-cavern riffs. While there's no denying that VoidOath knows how to glue a couple of gut-churning riffs together, it's the creepy, icky shit lurking between the cracks that really helps things coalesce. Beleaguered spoken word sections and unnerving dissonance add not only texture, but also tell the tale of a cold, unflinching alien presence doing its best to survive – and the paranoid desperation of the puny human skinsacks trying to do likewise. 💀💀💀½ AD



LORD OF CONFUSION

METAL

Evil Mystery

GRUESOME / MORBID AND MISERABLE

Thanks to the supreme and lasting majesty of Electric Wizard, drug-blasted doom metal influenced by '70s horror is a tough market to crack. Newcomer Lord of Confusion might be unlikely to topple said band from its (dope) throne but it at least gives it a good try with this debut full-length, the aptly titled *Evil Mystery*. Stronger, more focused, and more confident than the previous *Burnin' Valley EP*, this woozy endeavour sees huge, shaggy-headed riffs traipse and tumble ever forth, while a funeral organ adds a portentous layer of gloom that speaks to a love of classic features by studios like Hammer and Amicus. The real star here, though, is singer Carlota Sousa, whose phosphorescent voice glides through the record's dank psychedelic catacombs like a mysterious spirit whose intent is altogether unclear – it could be seeking aid in releasing it from this tedious mortal realm or have motives that are, in fact, far more sinister... 💀💀💀 AD



VOIDOATH

METAL

Ascension Beyond Kokytus

COGNITIVE DISCORDANCE / CURSED MONK

Given how trope-bound horror-fuelled metal can be (slashers, serial killers, and zombies for the meat 'n' potatoes crowd; Lovecraftian monstrosities for those wanting something a dab weird), it's always welcome when a band looks elsewhere for inspiration. Take Costa Rica's VoidOath, which based its first album





THE SOUND OF SEANCE

HALLOWEEN MIGHT BE OVER, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN IT'S TOO LATE TO KEEP THINGS SPOOKY WITH A NEW DO-IT-YOURSELF SEANCE ALBUM. You read that right, one of the coolest records I've come across in some time landed in my lap this fall season: a glow-in-the-dark vinyl titled *Seance! With Zabrecky* from In the Red Records. Robert Zabrecky has had quite the varied career across California, mostly using his own vocal cords: he fronted the pop punk band Possum Dixon in the '90s, did a stint as a professional auctioneer, and has been performing as a magician for the past decade or so. Along the way, he discovered the magic of seances.

"I'd attended a few seances in the Houdini Seance Room at the Magic Castle and was drawn to them for various reasons," Zabrecky explains. "As a magical performer, I was attracted to the theatrical side of the seance world – the theatrical build and climax of them as live performance pieces. I started reading anything I could about the spiritualism movement of the 1920s when seances were all the rage in the United States and England."

The idea to record an actual seance and press it on vinyl – probably the first of its kind – came through a meeting with Larry Hardy, who owns famed California garage rock label In the Red Records. Hardy was interested in recording something seance related for his label.

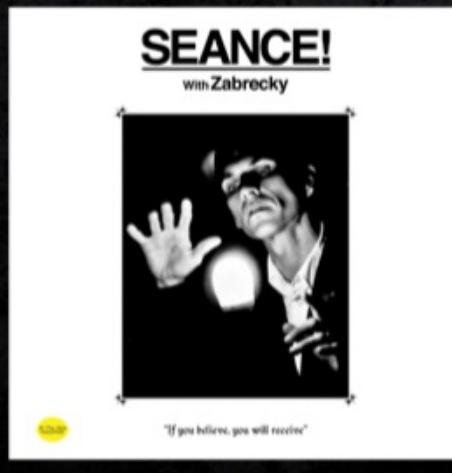
"At that point I was making a seance-themed YouTube show called *Other Side with Zabrecky*, in which some of my friends in showbiz came to my house for a one-on-one seance and we attempted to contact a spirit of their choice," says Zabrecky. "The

show, which I created with my wife Tommi, lasted one season and featured some great guests like Jack Black (who wanted to reach Kurt Cobain), Jason Sudeikis (who wanted to reach Pete Maravich), and Kate Flannery (who wanted to reach Ethel Merman). Once the concept was solidified, my friend Josh Erkman from the band Lamps connected me with producer/guitarist Emmett Kelly, and everything was smooth sailing."

The concept might be new, but what makes the record so great is what makes any record great: the sound. Zabrecky's voice isn't hokey or showman-y, using a tone that's both hushed but also oddly commanding. If you close your eyes, his voice will worm itself into your brain while being rounded out with fantastic analog synth sounds as well as harp, creating a warm, oh-so-retro atmosphere for the spirit world to cross over into.

"I think the idea was to provide a gentle approach for listeners to get the most out of their listening experience and aid them on their spirit-seeking journey," Zabrecky says. "Once we started recording, I treated the experience as if I was speaking to a group of seance attendees. Emmett was very grounding and helped create a cool and calm approach while the record button was lit."

What resulted is something akin to playing with a Ouija board in your parents' basement right before an all-night VHS-a-thon. So call up a few friends with a keepsake of someone they've lost, because the spooky season may have officially passed but *Seance! With Zabrecky* proves there's still more haunting to be had. ☠



ADI GEL THE FIELD

ADI GEL THE FIELD



NOW PLAYING > SCORN, CULT OF THE LAMB



SCORN

XBOX Series X/S, PC
Ebb Software

From the ashes of a failed crowdfunding campaign in 2014 comes a highly anticipated atmospheric horror nightmare in Ebb Software's *Scorn*. Awakening as a skinless, vaguely humanoid creature, players are thrust into an alien environment where strange machinery requires even stranger methods to operate it. Semi-organic control panels with fleshy finger holes abound, but *Scorn*'s decaying doorways won't open without some serious futzing, including puzzles that release eggs containing bloodied, mutant creatures and require manipulating these pitiful beings to occasionally hideous ends. Experimentation is critical, and sometimes those trials result in the suffering of creatures as lost and confused as ourselves, putting the player in the unenviable (but sadistically satisfying) role of mad scientist and torturer.

Each self-contained level is expansive, requir-

ing meticulous exploration and attention to detail – broken equipment scattered throughout the ruins provides the only clues toward escape (assuming that's even your aim). Puzzles are tough, and even the cleverest of players can expect to spend at least 30 minutes on each level without the aid of cutscenes to hint at objectives. A chair sits alongside a giant rusty buzzsaw blade, while another receptacle incorporates what appears to be a giant ice cream scoop – whatever their purpose, rest assured it isn't pretty.

Scorn's stunning, Gigeresque art design has amassed much buzz in the gaming world since its 2020 trailer release (including extensive coverage in *RM#208*) but the opportunity to interact so intimately with the biomech environs takes things to a whole new level – pun intended. Later levels introduce dangerous critters but scarce ammo keeps the game firmly in stealth horror territory. The puzzle aspect takes centre stage with a gameplay experience more akin to *Myst*, but with gory and eerily existential elements that make one question the cost of survival.

Where we're going, we won't need skin – but



pack a bunch of patience and ingenuity. The rewards are manifold.

ANDREA SUBISSATI



HEADSHOTS: SPECTACULAR BIOMECH ENVIRONMENT, INNOVATIVE PUZZLES WITH SHOCKING RESULTS
MISFIRES: MAY BE FRUSTRATING TO IMPATIENT PLAYERS



CULT OF THE LAMB

PC, Mac, PS4, Xbox One/X/S,
Nintendo Switch
Devolver Digital

If you've ever found yourself thinking "I'd make a great cult leader!" then *Cult of the Lamb* will let you put that thought to the test.

After suffering the indignity of sacrifice and being brought back to life by an exiled god, players are tasked with starting a cult that will wreak vengeance upon the four gods responsible for his downfall. In *Cult of the Lamb* that means base-building, dungeon-crawling (a.k.a. crusading), farming, setting doctrines for your cult to live by, and levelling up said cult for even more power and perks. There are four difficulty levels to choose from and replay value primarily

comes from raising the difficulty or attempting to complete the objectives more efficiently.

Visually, *Cult of the Lamb* is reminiscent of Klei's *Don't Starve*, but bloodier and with grislier monsters, offering a nice juxtaposition to the player's character and cultists, which take the form of cutesy critters. Of course, should you go the evil cult leader route, you'll soon be sacrificing those furry creatures and possibly feeding their remains to the rest of your initiates. Don't let that colourful cartoonish artwork trick you, dark choices await within.

These choices include how you will build your cult's base and which upgrades, fleeces, rituals, and doctrines you'll select to exploit during gameplay. Some make crusading or building devotion easier, others grant new perks while removing existing ones, so some thought and planning is necessary. Cumulatively, these decisions allow for considerable customization to



match your style of play and personal strengths (or weaknesses).

Cult of the Lamb is easily the most fun you'll have as a cult leader short of starting a questionable religious sect yourself. Just don't be surprised if you find yourself proselytizing to friends and family that they need to join the ritual too.

MONICA S. KUEBLER



HEADSHOTS: GREAT BALANCE BETWEEN CRUSADING, FARMING, AND BASE-BUILDING
MISFIRES: FLEECE PERKS ARE OFTEN MORE FRUSTRATING THAN USEFUL

CHRONICLE



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ZOMBIES HAVE REIGNED SUPREME IN HORROR FOR DECADES, DUE TO THEIR RELATIVE CHEAPNESS TO EXECUTE AND THEIR ENDURING CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL SATIRE. BUT HAVE THEY OVERSTAYED THEIR WELCOME, LIKE SO MUCH ROTTING FLESH? TWO OF OUR WRITERS ENTER THE RING TO BATTLE IT OUT!

IS THE ERA OF ZOMBIE CINEMA FINALLY DEAD?

YES!

DAKOTA DAHL

"We've lost both the ability to be terrified of zombies, as well as the ability to be repulsed by them."

NO!

LENA REID

"The living dead have munched on our brains like so much movie theatre popcorn for nearly a century – and with good reason."

ZOMBIES HAVE TOTALLY JUMPED THE UNDEAD SHARK AND NEED TO GO THE WAY OF THE PET ROCK. Back when George A. Romero turned the subgenre into the rotten powerhouse it is today, he had something to say. The dead coming back to life was once a useful (if heavy-handed) metaphor for our racism, consumerism, jingoism, what have you. Now, zombies are just a shambling backdrop for myriad filmmakers to repeat "the real monsters are humans" – which was fascinating the first three dozen times we heard it, but each subsequent depiction of that well-worn message has become the narrative equivalent of a rubber chicken.

We currently have three different *The Walking Dead* shows taking up the airwaves, relentlessly reminding us that humans, when unshackled by the chains of society, become complete murderous dickheads – there's only so many Negans you can inject into that show to keep it interesting. As Romero himself lamented, zombies have become little more than bullet fodder, the extra little add-on that developers shoehorn in as cash-grabbing DLCs, meant to be mowed down in waves instead of being feared in every single encounter, because they aren't interesting enough to carry a video game on their own. Hell, we have games depicting them getting outwitted by plants! What's worse is that the subgenre has been reduced, reused and recycled to the point of being bland, where every single zombie is just a soggy, half-falling-apart bog person, less menacing than the panhandling bums we see downtown.

Thanks to their overuse, we've lost both the ability to be terrified of zombies, as well as the ability to be repulsed by them. They're old hat, and they're taking up space in the zeitgeist that could be used for newer, more refreshing monsters. They've had their fun in the sun, no doubt, but it's high time for them to return to the grave and stay there. ☠

FACT: ZOMBIES ARE SIMPLY INCAPABLE OF JUMPING THE SHARK, AND NOT JUST BECAUSE OF THEIR DISINTEGRATING ANKLE JOINTS. From their cinematic debut in Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) to George A. Romero's *Dead* series to the record-breaking dominance of AMC's *The Walking Dead* to today, the living dead have munched on our brains like so much movie theatre popcorn for nearly a century – and with good reason.

There's their malleability, for one: zombie fare can no longer even be assumed to be horror movies, with the ghouls transcending formats and genres alike. Whether they're used as metaphors for social satire, gags for gory comedy's sake, or yes, a quick-and-dirty way for amateur filmmakers to cut their cinematic teeth by casting friends and family members in tattered clothing, this is hardly evidence that their reign of terror is at an end. Quite the opposite, in fact. You'd be laughed out of any conversation by saying the vampire craze has come and gone, and zombies have easily weathered more trends, tropes, and terrors than blood-suckers have.

Have zombie movies been done to (un)death with uneven results? Certainly. But as horror hits of the past ten years have shown us, there's still some fresh red stuff coursing through those rotting veins. International fare, such as the South Korean *Train to Busan* (2016) and last year's controversial Taiwanese shocker *The Sadness*, has demonstrated that differing perspectives can breathe new life

into these tired tropes, while walkers continue to dominate the serialized format through *All of Us Are Dead* and the new *Resident Evil* show.

You might be sick of zombies, but to say their time has come would be as fatal a fallacy as those doomed schmucks in the movies who dare underestimate the tenacity of the undead or think that they'll survive a fateful bite. Like it or not, there's plenty of narrative life left in those shambling corpses – in one form or another, zombies are here to stay. Get with it or be devoured; simple as that. ☠



LAST ISSUE'S WINNER
AS VOTED BY YOU ON TWITTER

WHAT IS THE BEST HORROR MOVIE OF THE PAST
25 YEARS TO WATCH ON HALLOWEEN NIGHT?

TRICK 'R TREAT
(2007)



DRAG ME TO HELL
(2009)

TRICK 'R TREAT IS THE BEST HORROR MOVIE OF THE PAST
25 YEARS TO WATCH ON HALLOWEEN NIGHT.

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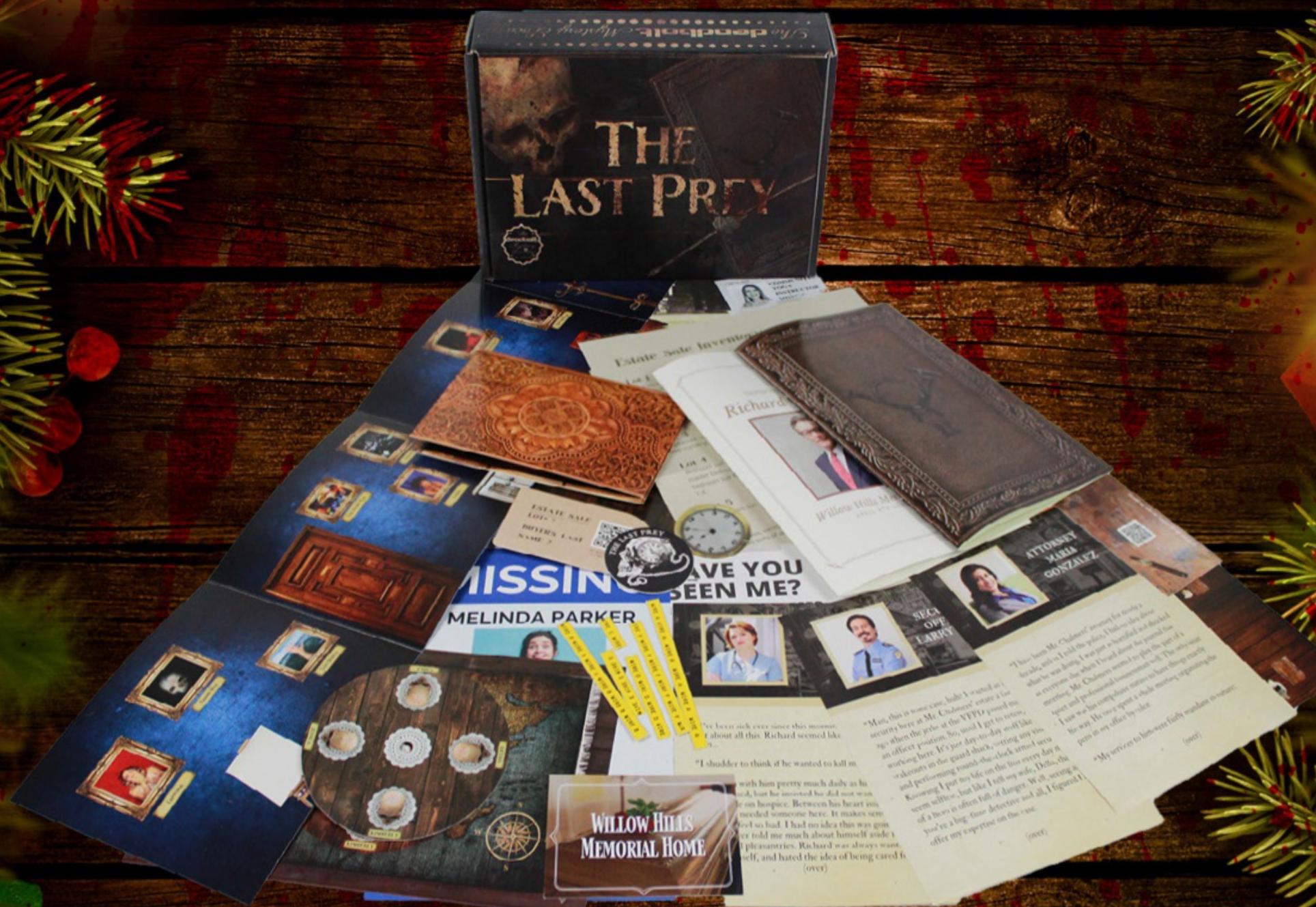


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